



## **Social-Specificity in Practice**

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**Environmental Art Master's Thesis**

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Fig. 1. Me and the Melliferopolis hives in Kaisaniemi Botanical Garden, Finland, 2015

## Abstract

This thesis examines the connection between developments in Western philosophy concerning the definitions and understanding of society, social and community, in relation to nonhuman elements within our environments, and an increasingly distanced relationship to the production and consumption of food. Through identifying a sub-category of critical arts practice, social-specific art, this thesis explores these ideas and the potential they have for altering perceptions of the human position on Earth. Three projects that engage different communities or collectives with different consumables, are presented here as examples of work I have developed within the context of a social-specific practice. The artworks involve collaborations and exchanges of skills and knowledge about the contents of different food and drink or the environment needed to create them. The work has been produced alongside discussions and research into the philosophical ideas of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory; the notion of social as associations and the abandoning of society altogether, and Jane Bennett's vibrant materiality; an attempt to increase awareness of the vibrancy of other actors on Earth, with the view that it could reduce environmentally destructive human behaviour. The terms society and social have been examined in relation to the human understanding of their entanglement with their environment and thus the term social-specific has been coined. My projects have been placed in the context of previous artists practicing critical art, including Helen and Newton Harrison, Joseph Beuys and the Critical Art Ensemble, as key influences in the movement towards and development of a social-specific practice that aims to connect humans with the hidden actors that, in this case, create the food and drink they consume.

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Fig. 2. Reflections, Otaniemi, Finland, 2014.

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Fig. 3. Zooplankton under the microscope, Kilpisjärvi, Finland, 2015.

## Introduction

In this climate of continual environmental, economic and social change, it is important for artists to consider their position in society and their responsibility towards current and future publics. “The artist cannot escape the social dimension [...] when the artist creates, the artist is projecting, in his or her work, the social influence, the political influence, the ideological influence with which the artist lives”<sup>1</sup>. If this is so, then artists hold a certain influence to direct significance towards issues, regardless of whether they intend to or not. This does not necessarily make it the ‘responsibility’ of an artist “anymore than the responsibility which we all must assume for securing the survival of this planet, but rather a possibility”<sup>2</sup>. This possibility can either be used to create work concerning contemporary issues, such as climate change, environmental destruction, social mobility and equality, or omitted by those with more traditional artistic desires still seeking answers for questions concerned with aesthetics or knowledge and understanding of materials. However, as humanity edges further into this time of uncertainty concerning food, water, wealth, eco-system health and decreasing biodiversity, it is important as a citizen of Earth and as an artist, to consider the impact of their artistic practice and be aware of the implications of environmental changes to their life style and that of their public.

The degradation of the natural environment is not only an issue for those worried about nature as such or about our legacy to future generations. It also concerns all of us from the prudential, self-interested point of view, since many resources on which we depend for our livelihoods are coming to the point of exhaustion.<sup>3</sup>

Many of these ‘resources’ are intertwined not just with ‘our livelihoods’,

1 Tom Finkerpearl. “Paulo Freire.” *Dialogues in Public Art*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 287.

2 Carol Becker. *Social Responsibility and the Place of the Artist*. (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1990), 19.

3 Thomas Heyd, *Encountering Nature: Toward an Environmental Culture*. (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

but more importantly with the ability to live. The degradation of the oceans will impact greatly on the oxygen levels in the air, thus reducing our ability to breathe, and a decline in insect populations and biodiversity will decrease pollination, thus increasing the costs of food production and reducing food resilience, for example. The web of entanglement is unavoidable and humans can no longer remain detached from the impacts of their activities. “Humans exist in society. Everything they do is entangled not only with other humans but all other lifeforms, objects, and phenomena”<sup>4</sup>. Through developing a deeper understanding and awareness of an individual’s own impact on their environment and creating an understanding of the other actors enabling their existence, perhaps a new world can be not just imagined, but performed. In other words, if the human focus could be realigned with the basic needs of oxygen, food, water and shelter, then perhaps we could continue developing society in a more environmentally friendly manner. I am not proposing we should stop living in cities or inventing and developing new technologies, nor I am harking back to the olden days, although that could be a preferable solution for some. Instead I aim to assist in the reconsideration of these key elements during the day-to-day act of living and recognise the importance of the eco-systems that support and sustain human life.

Food and drink, the act of consuming, is a necessity for all animal life, humans included. Through the physical act of eating to create energy, animals differentiate themselves from plants that photosynthesise and absorb nutrients from the soil<sup>5</sup>. Through the eating of food and the drinking of liquids human life is sustained. However, what is consumed and the way it is consumed influences who an individual becomes, shaping their physical bodies alongside their moral, ethical and political philosophy. Even those who claim to think little of the sorts of food and drink products they buy are contributing to a wider political and economic sphere, through choosing to shop at a supermarket or an independent grocers for example. The term consuming,

4 Charles Esches, Introduction to “Self-Empowering”, in *Truth is Concrete: a handbook for artistic strategies in real politics*, ed. steirischer herbst and Florian Malzacher, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 97.

5 It is important to acknowledge here that carnivorous plants that ‘eat’ insects do exist, but there is a difference in how they consume as they do not seek out prey. Instead, they lay in wait for flies to get stuck or fall directly into their digestive enzymes, or for bacteria to rot them down to enable the absorption of the nutrients.

formerly used with reference to all living creatures, has become inextricably linked to money, and thus to human activity in recent years. As capitalism has taken hold across the Western world, humans have become consumers rather than people in business speak; consumers of not only food and drink, but of natural resources, everyday ‘essential’ products and packaging and continuous upgrades in technology, with economic progress becoming interlinked with growth and consumption. In the social-specific practice I have developed and present in this text, emphasis is placed back onto communities in relation to the production of edibles, regardless of whether an object is actually manifested or not through a collaborative process.

Through acknowledging the basic human need to consume, the method of practice presented here approaches the topic from various angles, creating, protecting and observing, and involves different defined communities, human and nonhuman, to engage people with the ‘social-specific’<sup>6</sup> environmental issues facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As an artist interested in effecting social change through my arts practice, direct interaction and involvement with individuals or communities has been a method worth investigating. No one can be told of the potential horrors of the future and be expected to think they can change the world, however, they can be given the space to make, do, think or discuss, relevant to their wants and needs, and work to improve a situation within their community. This active engagement with a specific issue and desire for concrete change has the activist tendency of direct action within the public realm, but still roots itself with the context of the art world and philosophical ideas concerning society. In this type of practice, people and social issues provide the “medium and material”<sup>7</sup> for the artwork, allowing for the creation of dialogical or physical interventions, addressing both political and philosophical ideas concerning society and in this case, the agency of ‘others’, nature, and community.

As artists step out of the old framework and reconsider what it means to be an artist, they are reconstructing the

6 See chapter 2: From Site-specific to Social-specific, p.20-23, for an explanation on the choice to label the arts practice presented in this thesis as ‘social-specific’ as opposed to site-specific or community-specific, and chapter 3: The Rise of Critical Art, to understand it as in the context of other sub-categories in the broader movement of critical art.

7 Florian Malzachers, “Putting the Urinal back in the Restroom: The Symbolic and the Direct Power of Art and Activism” in *Truth is Concrete*, 18.



relationship between individual and community, between art work and public. Looking at art in terms of social purpose rather than visual style, and setting a high priority on openness to what is Other.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to understand what this 'new framework' is and can be. As philosophy moves from human centred towards encompassing all planetary matter within human agency<sup>9</sup>, it becomes relevant to question ideas of the social and community once more. Addressing the converging commonalities that exist across the political position of the artistic activist with direct intention to effect change and the philosophical position of rethinking or realigning human thought towards a more complete commons, for both human and other, may prove valuable to the development of this 'new framework' and the type of practices and possibilities able to effect change. Acknowledging the crossover characteristics that emerge through considering the empowerment that can be achieved by direct action, Charles Esche calls for a shift in the use of art, proclaiming that "art that engages with self-empowerment, then, is about unleashing a sense of being in common, of being part of something bigger than a discrete human body, and of feeling a sense of saying both 'I can' and 'we can' at the exact same moment."<sup>10</sup> Here, I present a practice developed through skills share, knowledge exchange and interaction within the public realm, alongside thoughts and theories pertaining to small agencies and other actors within the environment, to create a platform for the two positions to complement each other, in order to increase understanding of how it is possible to be in a time such as this. As Nato Thompson stated recently when lecturing on his publication *Living as Form*, participatory art, socially engaged art, activism and social practice are just some of the terms coined

8 Suzi Gablik, "Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism" in *Mapping the Terrain, New Genres in Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 76.

9 Human agency has become a difficult term to pin down considering Bruno Latour's and Jane Bennett's thoughts on human-nonhuman collectives; more explanation concerning the entanglement of human-nonhuman actors is presented in chapter 1: Society and the Social. In the context of this introduction the term human agency is used to describe how humans "can experience themselves as forming intentions and as standing apart from their actions to reflect on the latter", taken from Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, p.31. However, she goes on to recognise "[t]here was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and non-humanity", as a reminder to not take these problematic terms, that insinuate anyone can act alone within a situation, at face value.

10 Charles Esches, Introduction to "Self-Empowering", in *Truth is Concrete*, 98.

to describe critical art practices and artworks. Its scope and the diversity of issues it attempts to deal with makes it hard to assess the effectiveness of its engagement and empowerment within the public realm. Artists are not bound by a necessity to make an impact in relation to political and social issues, however, there should be some consideration given to the potential of critical art practices to make a difference.

The research I have conducted to create this thesis has been both theoretical and practical, pulling together theories from different disciplines, including sociology, politics and philosophy, as well as those from aesthetics and art history. These theories have been investigated along with three practical art projects, created to test the ideas and discover possibilities through practical application. I decided to work with texts across different disciplines when developing my theoretical standpoint to broaden the possibility for understanding how concepts of social and society are viewed and how they may have, and can still have, influence on an arts practice and the re-formation of society. Expanding my reading and referencing to include other non-art theories, and finding connections between fields such as sociology and philosophy in relation to art, has allowed me to broaden my understanding of what society could be from a diverse platform of knowledge. The reading I have undertaken is by no means exhaustive and I cannot claim to be an expert in these theories. I have chosen them because they correctly reflect my ideas, and have genuinely influenced my thinking and thus helped mould the arts practice I present in chapter 4, therefore to only reference artistic theories in relation to my projects would be inaccurate. All the projects have been created in collaboration, developed with different groups and potentials for impact, addressing various elements connected to human consumption. With this method of working, embedded in personal experiences and motivations, and aware of specific social, environmental and political problems within reach, I have found communities and set up interactions grounded in the everyday. My practice has been developed through increasing my understanding of the notions of society, agency, site and community, and has explored both traditional and alternative ways of disseminating the knowledge attained through artworks.



Fig. 4. Fridge contents, UK, 2015.

## Chapter 1: Fuelling Society

In human terms, fuelling society requires energy from natural resources such as oil, coal and gas, and fuelling the individual with edibles. At least in contemporary Western culture, this requires energy to be consumed through modern agriculture, transportation and the wide spread distribution of food. However, an individual's impression of their dependence on society, on others and on a community, has reduced with the development of money as service exchange, supermarkets and the internet<sup>1</sup>. Modern infrastructures have enabled individuals to avoid the need to ask for help or share their skills and knowledge in return, as most day-to-day problems can be fixed by watching a video on YouTube or visiting the shops. As humanity progresses towards the future with increasing instability<sup>2</sup>, actions that build up local resilience, re-engage neighbourhoods, and involve exchanging skills with those nearby to improve understanding and acknowledgement of the surrounding environment, will become more crucial. Therefore, it seems necessary to re-assess or adapt certain philosophical and sociological concepts of society and social structures to aid in the formation of artworks that attempt to tackle some of these issues.

### Society and the Social

The words society and social stem from the Latin *socius* meaning companion and *socialis* for companionship and have been associated throughout history

1 See p.46-47 for evidence of an increase in individualism, which has led to my conclusion that there has been a reduction in understanding concerning the importance and necessity of dependence upon each other in the 21st century.

2 Instability in relation to food, water and cheap energy as we reach the end of oil, alongside the depletion of other natural resources, destruction of various key eco-systems, reduction in soil fertility, mass extinction of many species, a rise in ocean acidification and reduction in biodiversity, along with increasing human population, regular extreme weather events and, of course, climate change.



with following, allying, community and communal activity<sup>3</sup>. However, in contemporary sociology the terms have become narrowed to apply specifically to humanity, thus limiting “the social to humans and modern societies”<sup>4</sup>. This is concerning, but not surprising, as it continues to confirm certain historical Western ideas with regards to nature, strengthening the separation between ‘us’, the human, and ‘them’, the nonhuman. The eighteenth-century saw a change in attitude, rejecting neoclassical ideas of order and rationality for “a deepened appreciation of the beauties of nature; a general exaltation of emotion over reason and of the senses over intellect”<sup>5</sup>. The Romanticists became interested in the human self and the sublime, combining the beauty of nature with a fear of its power, always in context with the human form in a given situation. The ‘picture-like’ aesthetic that is associated with this movement seems to have “govern[ed] our taste”<sup>6</sup> and the desire to put ‘nature on a pedestal’ has been argued to have had a negative influence on the human relationship with their surroundings, locally and globally. By positioning the human outside of nature, as the Romanticists did, humans have been able to separate themselves from thinking that the intricate web of connections and reliance that enables their very ability to exist is any of their concern. This has therefore enabled terms such as society to be reduced to describe only human activity. In order to think of society in the context of anything other than human, it is necessary to be aware of the disconnection created by the term nature and either exclude it from the discussion or define it further. However, defining it further becomes problematic as the very act confirms it as distinguishable and separate, therefore creating distance through division. Eco-critic and philosopher Timothy Morton has questioned the very use of the word nature, arguing that the ‘dualism’ between nature and ourselves is the cause of our destructive habits, suggesting that if humans “actually experience[d] the fact we were embedded in our world, we would be less likely to destroy it”<sup>7</sup>. The use of the word nature is fundamental to this categorisation

3 “Online Etymology Dictionary,” Douglas Harper, accessed February 4, 2015, [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=society&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=society&searchmode=none).

4 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

5 “Romanticism,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/508675/Romanticism>.

6 Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 61.

7 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 64.

and therefore will not be used within the definitions presented in this text. It is ‘embedded’ within a history of separation and therefore using it only strengthens this mindset and reduces the ability to extend definitions related to society. Now that nature has been denounced<sup>8</sup>, we can begin to address similar arguments made against the term society, a term which, for French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour<sup>9</sup> and others alike, can be just as problematic as nature as, in his eyes, society cannot be disentangled from its relation to human activity and the ingrained separation this has caused.

Bruno Latour titles his profession differently depending on the context and in his book *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* he is “proud of being called a sociologist”<sup>10</sup>. Whilst introducing Actor-Network-Theory or ‘ANT’ he actively avoids the term society, claiming it as non-existent, and initially establishes the social as a “very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling”<sup>11</sup>. According to Latour, the social could be “made of small individual calculative agents or of huge macro-actors”<sup>12</sup>, however, in *Reassembling the Social*, he prefers to focus his claim on becoming accustomed to the forever changing boundaries, limitations and actors at play within a collective or body politic, rather than discussing the potential scales of such actors. Latour links the social to unspecified agents, defining, it as “a type of connection between things”<sup>13</sup>, later defining these things as actors or actants, as opposed to thinking of social as a thing in its own right. For him, the

8 The nature/not-nature divide in Western philosophy has a strong history and involves many philosophers and thinkers from a variety of professions, however I am particularly interested in how Morton’s approaches this ‘dualism’ in *Ecology Without Nature* and this gives me reason to, at least for now, denounce the word, so that I am able to concentrate on another problematic term, society, that I understand to be more relevant in relation to the arts practice I am trying to develop with this thesis.

9 Note on authority: On reading Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, I became aware of Latour’s influence and language in her text, and thus began to research his theories and concepts concerning the agencies of ‘things’ and the term social from the source, finding it relevant for this discussion. Latour comes from a varied background and has trained as a philosopher and anthropologist, but also carries out historical and sociological research. I have used him as an authority, with over 20 years of writing concerning the social, because of his broad and diverse training and research base. It seems his vast ideas of social as associations could be useful for societal development, however they need a mid-point in which to land upon so that we can start to apply them to our everyday lives. My social-specific practice attempts to begin building that platform.

10 Latour, ‘Acknowledgements’ in *Reassembling the Social*, x.

11 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 7.

12 Ibid., 30.

13 Ibid., 5.

term society is inextricably linked to human activity and therefore, like nature, is a 'monster' of a word, stating "nature assembles non-humans apart from the humans; society collects humans apart from the non-humans"<sup>14</sup>. Here Latour argues that society as a term is lost, as previously decided with nature, however, Latour ignores an important distinction regarding the differing boundaries that the terms nature and society create. In his eyes society is a substance and therefore stops the fluidity of the social as associations<sup>15</sup>, thus he calls for the 'collecting of the collective', and a rethinking of the social without society. However, if humans became actively aware of the nonhumans in their collective(s), then ideas of what constitutes a society could also be broadened without the same constraints imposed by the use of the term nature. The argument seems clear for Latour's 'nature assembles non-humans apart from the humans', as nature creates a clear division between two groups that do not actually exist in the first place, therefore making the term redundant. However, society can still survive after the similarity is noted that 'society collects humans apart from the non-humans'. This is because any number of groups can exist through the many different types of societies around the world and thus the division cannot be so clearly observed. Society should be understood, not just in relation to human or nonhuman collectives and thus physical traits and characteristics, but rather in relation to the local or historical ties<sup>16</sup> of an environment or situation. A gardener, for example, may understand all the insects and plants within their locality as elements of their society that are vital to their endeavours and the possibility for garden creation. In Latour's first statement, nature is one entity and human is the other, but for the term society there can be many groupings and different elements at play making many different societies. Following this line of thought allows Latour's claim, that nature and society create the same problem, created from the same reason, to be challenged, so that society can be understood as a useful term again. The problem with society is not that it separates humans and nonhumans, but instead focuses solely on them, collecting humans apart from other humans,

<sup>14</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 164.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> I would suggest that viewing societies in relation to local and historical ties, seeing the human body as a geographical location or developing an awareness of nonhuman actors that contribute to the preservation of historical artifacts for example, could change the focus for the frameworks of societies, from a species based secularism to one that is based on 'social as associations', recognising the other actors in any given situation.

disregarding the nonhuman completely. This understanding was correct in the eyes of an earlier philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis<sup>17</sup> who embedded the social in the "doing of men and women in society, and nothing else"<sup>18</sup>. According to Castoriadis, the ability to self-reproduce was a defining element of a 'social-individual' and this, alongside a sense of belonging, developed by a 'social-history', created society. It is here that the connection between Castoriadis's and Latour's views on society as limited to 'men and women' and thus to the human can be seen, as it resonates with Latour's reasoning for banishing the term; it seems neither of them have wanted or been able to separate society from the human, even if their ideas of social oppose each other.

Before ANT, Latour's writing on the others present in society and a 'parliament of things' had suggested that society could encompass objects and the nonhuman, which ties in with ideas broached by political theorist Jane Bennett<sup>19</sup> in *Vibrant Matter*, as she discusses the possibilities that present themselves when the nonhuman is implicated in human agency. Through a discussion of organic and inorganic actants, Bennett develops a convincing argument suggesting that through fostering an awareness of "a natural *tendency* to the way things are [...] human decency and a decent politics are fostered"<sup>20</sup>. According to Bennett, we must expand ideas of interconnectivity and entanglement to recognise that agency is always created through a human-nonhuman assemblage. Taking Latour's idea of actors or actants within an interwoven network further, she suggests that a sensitivity or awareness of these actants is necessary

<sup>17</sup> Note on authority: Castoriadis is a French philosopher whose research topics spanned society, creativity and democracy, among others. Influenced by both traditional philosophers and modern thinkers, Castoriadis became of interest to my argument because of his awareness of a sense of belonging through the passing on of history for the creation and development of societies. I agree with some of his limitations, however disagree that history is only for 'men and women' and will discuss the importance of recognising other histories later in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, "Social Imaginary Significations" in *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 373.

<sup>19</sup> Note on authority: I have chosen to base many of my thoughts and arguments concerning society on Jane Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter* after I read chapter 7, Political Ecologies, and found myself in complete agreement with her interpretation of Charles Darwin's interest in worms. On reading the rest of the book it became clear that her line of thinking was close to mine and although we disagree on a few points, on the majority of ideas we do agree. Jane Bennett has trained in environmental studies, political science and political theory and has spent over 10 years writing about nature, ethics and the human-thing relationship and therefore I have found it relevant and interesting to bring her ideas into the creation of an arts practice that also attempts to deal with the human-thing relationship.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, 'Preface' in *Vibrant Matter*, xi.

in order to be able to live a decent life. By making a case for a “theory of action and responsibility that crosses the human-nonhuman divide”<sup>21</sup> Bennett opens the door to a new understanding of society. For her, if a human is no longer one singular self, but “rather, an array of bodies”<sup>22</sup>, then perhaps this awareness could cultivate a desire to engage “more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans”<sup>23</sup> both inside and outside the human collective or assemblage. By acknowledging not only the presence, but active power of non-human others in regards to human engagement on Earth, she challenges a series of pre-existing notions that things are passive, humans can only disturb and anthropomorphism is always negative.

The question is to decide whether the actor is ‘in’ a system or if the system is made up ‘of’ interacting actors [... the ‘actor-network’ solution] consider[s] *at once* the actor *and* the network in which it is embedded<sup>24</sup>

According to Latour, the social exists through the connection between actors and it is important to note here that for Latour and Bennett, actors; both human and nonhuman entities, are needed to allow the term social to be broadened once more to encompass not just plants and other animals, but all organic and inorganic materials in existence. Latour’s clear distinction of what constitutes an actor is based on the influence or effect an actor has on a situation, i.e. to be an actor, the ‘thing’ has to be affecting a given system. By considering that “actors will be said to be simultaneously held by the context and holding it in place, while the context will be at once what makes the actors behave and what is being made in turn by the actors’ feedback”<sup>25</sup>, his call for social as associations seems justified. For Latour, society cannot be seen as a network of influencing actors that includes human and nonhuman entities interwoven with each other, however, through adapting society to include both groupings, perhaps ‘we’ as humans can better understand our existence. In Castoriadis’s description of the social and society, his reference to the creation of history is used as a limiting factor, as the ability to create a history requires a means of recording moments in time for future generations to look back and learn

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>24</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 169.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

from. Humans tell, write, document and record their histories by a number of means, so the difference between human and other is perhaps, as Castoriadis would argue, the effect of the historical knowledge of a specific society and the creation of a sense of belonging to that society through the acquisition of this knowledge. However, if Bennett’s thought, that a human is not one self but many selves, is added into the discussion, then a human is held into place and allowed or enabled to act, tell, write and record its history through and with the help of other actors. It can then be argued that these others are automatically included in the history anyway, regardless of whether we chose to acknowledge them.

Of course, outside of this human centred recording of history, birds, fish and other animals also show a level of understanding of past rituals with yearly migration patterns learnt from the elders of their societies, and thus, those movements could be understood, by humans, as the way they record their history. If taken one step further, plants could be seen to pass down histories through their genes, or rocks through sedimentary layers, however, this does not require the same active learning of behaviour from elders and is instead a passive taking of information and is distinctly different from taught animal behaviours<sup>26</sup>. It is important to note that referring to nonhuman activities like migration in terms of history, positions their actions within the human construct of history which cannot be assumed without anthropomorphising them. However, this is about adapting terminology to help humans move towards a construction of society to enable ‘us’ to take more appropriate action in relation and response to the nonhuman others sharing our world. It is not about pushing a human agenda onto the actions of others, nor is it attempting to suggest or assume ‘we’ understand the reasons for their actions. It is instead about acknowledging them, becoming aware that they are valid member in our societies.

Now that an understanding of the ideas of Latour, Castoriadis and Bennett

<sup>26</sup> When defining historical context one should be open to the nonhuman possibilities of passing on a history, through migratory patterns, creation of food supplies and other informal or unconventional human ways of sharing culture. See *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* and *Translating Histories*, dual performance and installation discussed in chapter 4, p.73 for an example of how a non-human history can be analysed and translated for human understanding.

has been developed, adjustments and suggests for the sociological terms, the social and society, can be made by taking Latour's social as associations, and placing it back into society as the cultural, geographical or historical framework in which those associations take place. In this case, society is the group created by the connections holding the individuals together through a sense of belonging, pertaining to a context created by that specific social group. This definition takes into account Latour's thoughts concerning the social as an interwoven network, but also creates a framework for these thoughts by finding a mid-point between Castoriadis's idea of exclusively human societies and Bennett's unrestrained inclusivity. According to Bennett, shifting from a mind-set of environmentalism to vital materialism, "from a world of nature versus culture to a heterogeneous monism of vibrant bodies"<sup>27</sup> could be the turning point for a human's ability to understand how to co-exist with the others in their environments, therefore this work investigates the potentials of this change in mindset further by creating a middle way between these movements. The creation of this mid-point between Castoriadis and Bennett presents a possibility for individuals to apply Latour's ANT within their own localities, in relation to altering the traditional human way of thinking and being in the world, potentially taking us closer to a more diverse notion and understanding of society.

By adapting and expanding the notion of society, the term can become relevant once more, useful in helping progress human thought and action towards ANT and an acknowledgement of nonhuman others. Through developing this notion of social as associations, and thus an increased recognition of the vibrancy of things, humans can start to acknowledge the interspecies societies in which they reside, creating a possibility for a more connected understanding of existence. By levelling the value of life and introducing a wider notion of society, it creates possibilities for more holistic ways of thinking and existing on Earth. Here it is important to note, as Jane Bennett has already, that this attempt to level value in terms of life is not about strengthening ideals related to "tread[ing] lightly on the Earth"<sup>28</sup>, protecting and conserving as environmentalist may argue, nor is it about demanding the preservation of life at all costs as some pro-life campaigners may attempt to conclude. It is

<sup>27</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 121.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

about taking an interest in the active and passive forces at play that influence and effect each other in continuous exchange. In the near future perhaps society, as a framework, will become as redundant as nature. However, in the current situation and within the structures applicable today, to present Latour's associations without any framework seems too complex to grasp and implement. However, by thinking of the social as associations and of a society as the cultural, geographical or historical frameworks in which those particular associations exist, both human and nonhuman, my arts practice acts to expand the idea of society, so that it can form a bridge between the infrastructures already in place and the potential after-structures of the future. It is due to the many overwhelming issues apparent in modern times, such as ecological disasters, climate change, unrestrained capitalism, mass extinction, landfill, existing and acting around the globe today, that adapting definitions of society and the social has been seen as necessary, as they potentially offer a pathway towards a more complete and rounded way of interacting and understanding who and how to be in this world.

### Consumer Society

The development of modern agriculture has meant that food and drink are no longer things that most individuals grow or make, but rather products that they buy, making it hard to imagine a world without supermarkets. Local knowledge of food preparation and preservation is being lost or forgotten as it is not currently seen as a necessity to know how to pickle vegetables, ferment fruits or make jams, with the possibility to buy food just a short trip away. One potential impact is that a cultural crisis may develop as links with the 'seeds of the past'<sup>29</sup> are broken and the food system is monopolised by corporate conglomerates. This is due to a shift in food production that has changed

<sup>29</sup> This comment is related to the handing down of literal seeds i.e. heirloom seeds that have been passed down through generations in a particular group of people. These seeds can be seen as one way for a collective to share and maintain historical and cultural 'roots' with the past concerning gardening and food for the people involved. The seeds can also be seen as a way of remaining connected to the soil and landscape of their surroundings and that of their forefathers, as environments become more developed and natural landscape features become less prevalent. For more information concerning the importance of heirloom seeds to the future of food see, *Enduring Seeds : Native American Agriculture and Wild Plant Conservation* by Gary Paul Nabhan, 2002, centred on the humans' evolving relationship with seeds and the impact of lost biodiversity in the food system due to modern agricultural techniques.



the ability for individuals to take action towards affecting their food source, converting much of humanity from creators to consumers. This shift can also be seen through a change in what we consume, as much of what is bought and sold these days has no actual physical presence, but is contained and kept alive by advancing technologies i.e. branding, advertising, and the financial market, making money from money rather than from physical commodities. This market shift has changed the value and understanding of not only the physical presence of an object, thus what can be acquired for money, but of money itself. With increasing numbers of people spending money online for online services, matched with increasingly easy ways to pay with credit and debit cards, it is becoming far less common to swap physical cash for a physical object, changing the relationship and perhaps awareness of the consumer to the value of the exchange. Therefore, the shift from pre-money to post-money, i.e. from exchange of physical goods, thus physical labour on both sides, to real gold mined from the Earth, to paper money produced when needed, to a piece of plastic or a code, has altered the notion of give and take, allowing humans to give 'money' and take resources. This progression in the monetary system has created and is playing a part in increasing an imbalance through a difference in complexity, by reducing the act of giving to a card that represents the money an individual owns or can borrow, compared with the act of taking a physical product produced using real energy and nutrients from the Earth.

This altered notion of give and take has become the norm in many capitals and other densely populated cities, where the capitalist agenda is stronger than in rural communities. The lack of space or time in these areas makes it difficult for individuals to start narrowing the give and take divide that has been widening alongside industrial development. Personal motivation, the support of a community and the physical ability to make a desired change have been widely agreed as necessary factors contributing to the possibility of any change happening. Therefore, in order for an individual to want to rethink or adapt their understanding of society and make behavioural changes to acknowledge nonhuman actors within the collective in which they live, they have to be given the tools and support to do so. Unfortunately, many do not have the land, time or knowledge to create enough food to sustain their lives on a day-to-day basis. Thus, many of the problems associated with climate change, such as modern mass food production, are seen as impossible for the individual to affect, as in most cases they have no physical ability to change

policy and reduce a country's carbon footprint by themselves. However, once personal motivation is found within a community of equally motivated others, the wants and needs of the masses cannot be ignored in the same way as those of an individual; not necessarily through picket lines, but through the effect of market forces, supply and demand. There is potential for personal motivation to grow through the development of an individual's moral, philosophical stance on the subject. Therefore, the development of artistic practices that work to raise an awareness and understanding of new possibilities and the significance of others within this world, may help ingrain these developments within the psyche of the public realm and help to change our understanding of what consumer society could be.



Fig. 5. Tomatoes, UK, 2015.



**“I WENT FROM BEING  
AN ARTIST THAT MAKES  
THINGS TO AN ARTIST THAT  
MAKES THINGS HAPPEN”**

Jeremy Deller

## Chapter 2: The Lure of the Social

Increased concern for environmental and economic issues of this century has encouraged a growth in the number of artists intending to effect social change through their practice. A swell of different movements are attempting to achieve this. It is therefore important to be aware of the argument that these different modes or ‘shifts’ are “more powerful as ideals than as actualized realities”<sup>1</sup> when considering how to use creativity for social change. In this chapter I will introduce social-specific practice as a term to identify art that engages people with human and nonhuman actors within the wider definition of society and the understanding of social as associations presented in the previous chapter. Through focusing on products and situations entrenched in human routine, my practice aims to alter some of the perceived normalities related to consumption. “Habit is the mainspring of human action, and habits are formed for the most part under the influence of the customs of a group [...] every act effects a modification of attitude and mind set which directs future behaviour”<sup>2</sup>. In order to challenge, change or break these habits, I have created or positioned myself within groups, working with communal interests, to explore habits through engagement and participation with the aim to instigate social change.

Many artists, concerned with the current state of the world, are looking for new ways they can act and influence society to develop a more environmentally friendly or just way of being and direct engagement may prove to be one way in which this can, to some extent, be achieved. Art that involves public participation is not a new idea and has been developing a strong foothold in all shapes and sizes in the contemporary art scene for a number of decades. Since

1 Claire Bishop, Introduction to *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, by Claire Bishop (London: Verso Books, 2012), 2.

2 John Dewey, “Search for the Great Community: The Public and its Problems,” in *The Essential Dewey: Pragmatism, education, democracy, Volume 1*, ed. Larry A Hickman and Thomas M Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 298.

the ‘social turn’ of 1990’s<sup>3</sup>, an increasing number of artists are choosing to engage in direct exchange with groups of people to co-create and thus “place pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism”<sup>4</sup>, situating themselves outside of the consumerist art market and alongside the public they hope to influence through working together. By relating social-specificity to developments in the understanding of what constitutes site-specificity, an already well-established artistic construct, this chapter begins to contextualise my practice within the artistic realm. The movement, social-specificity, can and is emerging, combining theoretical and philosophical ideas of society with creative acts that engage individuals with various elements of their collective(s), in order to increase awareness of the human-nonhuman assemblage that is always acting together.

### From Site-specific to Social-specific

The shift towards making work to engage and potentially influence the customs of a group or community can already be seen with the movement towards, not just site-specificity; an increasingly relevant mode of practice in current times, but more specifically towards working with particular social habits, to re-examine or explore them in contemporary culture and society.

Today’s site-oriented art is the way in which both the art work’s relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) *and* the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are *subordinate* to a *discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate. [...] this site is not defined as a precondition. Rather, it is *generated* by the work (often as “content”) and then *verified* by its convergence with an existing discursive formation.<sup>5</sup>

3 Claire Bishop’s term to describe a shift in the relationship between artist, art object and audience in the 1990’s and the concept of co-authorship in art making within the public realm. See her introduction in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012, as she starts her critical discussion concerning art of this kind.

4 Bishop, “Introduction” in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2.

5 Miwon Kwon, “One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” October 80, (1997):92. Accessed March 20, 2015. [http://www.ira.usf.edu/CAM/exhibitions/2008\\_8\\_Torolab/Readings/One\\_Place\\_After\\_AnoterMKwon.pdf](http://www.ira.usf.edu/CAM/exhibitions/2008_8_Torolab/Readings/One_Place_After_AnoterMKwon.pdf).

The terms site-oriented or site-specific can be problematic when discussing them in the context of the social and dialogical exchanges that curator and art historian Miwon Kwon<sup>6</sup> presents here, as it can be said that the term site is too broad and tied, through the complexity of its role in art history, to an aesthetic experience of a site, whatever that may be defined as: locational, dialogical or a social or institutional framework. Although a consideration of the aesthetic experience of an artwork is important, whether negative or positive, the artwork should not be controlled by this notion, especially when the participants and/or collaborators are from a variety of different knowledge backgrounds and life histories. Kwon accepts that for some, the physical site has now been “displaced by a group of people assumed to share some sense of common/communal identity”<sup>7</sup>. She is also seemingly able to separate the term site from the physical domain through the realisation that the constraints present in a physical site are out of touch with current ideas representing “life as a network of unanchored flows”<sup>8</sup>. As new ways of seeing the network of the self and others develop wider acceptance, in terms of society and the social, a site can therefore become the situation or dialogue rather than the grounds and spatial surroundings holding a community or society in place. Kwon questions whether this new nomadic relationship to and understanding of site is able to “sustain cultural and historical specificity”<sup>9</sup>, however, if social is always linked to history through society then the site will always be grounded in some way, shape or form in relation to the society involved. Through acknowledging that a ‘relational specificity’ or ‘sensitivity’; an awareness of the relation or association of one thing ‘next to’ another, rather than “one thing after another”<sup>10</sup>, is necessary for the formation and validity of a site-specific artwork, she lays the foundations for the creation of a new term that acknowledges the ideas of Latour and Bennett regarding the entanglement of

6 Miwon Kwon is a Korean-American curator and art historian and the author of *One Place After Another*, a book that critically presents the changing state of site-specific art from the 1960’s to the late 1990’s.

7 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 112.

8 Ibid., 164. Here Kwon acknowledges a change in perception of life, understanding it now as a network of ‘unanchored flows’. This relates well to a notion of society that encompasses other actors and the social as associations, the network being the ties that hold every ‘thing’ together.

9 Ibid., 166.

10 Ibid.

life. Therefore, the term social, previously defined as the associations within a society; the relational framework of cultural, geographical, historical ties of a group, seems an appropriate word to replace site and tackle this etymological dilemma.

In an artistic context, social can be seen as a relatively neutral term in comparison with community, which comes with its own art-historical connection to artist as master, often linked with helping integrate minority groups and providing services akin to social work. Community as a term can be problematic and has been abandoned by Kwon because of a tendency for community projects to soften rather than solve situations. Similarly, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>11</sup> has avoided community in favour of a “being *in* common”<sup>12</sup>, preferring to recognise the commonality of ‘being’ in relation to sharing. Nancy’s belief that a sense of being ‘together’ is the defining factor of community, rather than the existence of a common trait among members, could be another way of seeing social as associations, through the ontology related to community. Nancy questions whether “stones, mountains, the bodies of a galaxy [would] be ‘together’ if seen from a certain perspective, not ours”<sup>13</sup> and thus he follows a stream of thought close to vibrant materiality.

However, this ‘being in common’ is too abstract in this context as it still has the potential to create a separation between the actors in relation to a site. Although it has the power to realise similarities, it still prevents an explanation of the intertwined nature of the situation within which the actors are continually engaging and exchanging. However, when social, as defined in chapter 1, is used in the context of a Berleantian<sup>14</sup> definition of environment as “a network of interwoven and reciprocal influences [... that]

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy is a French philosopher whose research topics include politics, freedom, community and the self. After reading Miwon Kwon’s thoughts on his interpretation of community I returned to the source *Of Being-in-Common*, a text he wrote for The Miami Theory Collective and their publication *Community at Loose Ends* to learn more.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Of Being-in-Common” in *Community at Loose Ends*, trans. by James Creech, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis, Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>14</sup> I have used the term Berleantian to acknowledge American philosopher Arnold Berleant who has written extensively on aesthetic theory and the arts, with focus on environmental aesthetics and ethics. After reading Berleant in 2013 his ideas became an influencing force, helping to shape my practice and my movement towards viewing the world as interconnected, fluid and encompassing.

carry on continuous exchange [...] of interacting forces”<sup>15</sup>, then it can be used to explain the different exchanges taking place within work of this kind, both environmental and social, with the one term. In philosopher Arnold Berleant’s discussion concerning aesthetics and community in *Living in the Landscape, Towards an Aesthetic of Environment*, he recognises the weakness of the individual by including the environment in his discussion of mutuality and social order, demanding that “environment must be reconceptualised, changing from surroundings regarded as separate from ourselves to a matrix that is continuous with and includes us, a constant process of reciprocity among all the factors that constitute it”<sup>16</sup>, therefore recognising it as part of the social situation. If social beings or actors are influencing and being influenced by each other, thus carrying on continuous exchange, and if environment is always interacting through a truly interwoven network simultaneously, then environment can and will be included in the definition of social, as the actors cannot be seen as separate from the environment they are acting in or with. Hence, the term environment is intertwined with social and must be considered within this context. The environment becomes part of the social, and thus part of complexity of agency and the possibility for anything and everything to act, continually influenced and altered by the agencies present. Therefore, when discussing an arts practice attempting to deal with the issues presented here, engaging both environmental and social issues with a communal aspect, the term social-specific will be used. Social-specific is far more succinct and able to explain this type of work or movement than site-specific, as it no longer sees the site as something physical and separate from the beings that inhabit and produce within it, but instead acknowledges the site as the connections that enable the social to become visible.

### Finding Collectives in a Social-specific Practice

Community has now been recognised as a problematic term due to its strong associations with connecting individuals through common traits, i.e. cultural, religious or historical values, rather than the physical sense of being together, strengthening species related and often human centric divisions

<sup>15</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetic of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 161.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 145.

between groups of beings. This, paired with preformed ideas related to the art historical context of community art projects, means avoidance of this term is preferable and another word should be appropriated when discussing the 'communities' that create, are engaged or become part of the artwork within a social-specific practice. Although Latour and Bennett seem comfortable with terms like network, assemblage or collective to describe groups of actants and collaborations between earthly entities, human and nonhuman alike, it is questionable whether any of these could be viable options to replace community. Although the term network is good for describing basic connections or ties, it comes with problematic connotations in regards to technology i.e. the internet, and the career orientated idea of networking connected with a desire to 'get ahead' and thus individualist thinking. Therefore, it is an inappropriate term for attempting to uncover or concretise homogeneous social formations. Assemblage is also ill-suited, particularly when described by Bennett as never "a stolid [calm and dependable] block but an open-ended collective"<sup>17</sup>. Assemblage, when thought of in this way, is removed from any connection with common or communal activity. It is instead a gel that "endures alongside energies and factions that fly out from it and disturb it from within"<sup>18</sup>, making it too far removed from the idea of community as a supportive force. Assemblage also has connections with the term assembly, which is often used to describe a planned meeting of people and could be confusing when trying to define a broader term to include non-humans. Collective on the other hand is used by Latour in replacement for society, as a term "designate[d for] the project of assembling new entities not yet gathered"<sup>19</sup>, and has an etymological background stemming from the latin '*collectus*', or '*colligere*', translated as 'to gather together'<sup>20</sup>. The act of collecting in order to be together offers a potential framework for groups to develop or exist, but also acknowledges the fluidity of life and the consistent force of change. By using collective, actants can be included alongside an acknowledgement that both humans and nonhumans are always in motion, not as a fixed group gathered together, but rather as an interchangeable

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 75.

<sup>20</sup> "Online Etymology Dictionary," accessed May 5, 2015, [http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=collect&searchmode=none](http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=collect&searchmode=none).

group continually gathering together. This suits the previous conclusion for the term social as it relates to an understanding of the continuous exchange and interwoven network that all entities exist within. Collective also seems appropriate for practical reasons in terms of its already common linguistic use to describe the practice of cooperatives, common interests or motivations. It is not tied to the idea of 'common traits' with the same force as community, and instead able to apply to all sorts of organic and inorganic entities being bunched together.

However, before considering how to engage with possible collectives, it is important to understand what a collective can be, now that social and society have been extended to include nonhuman entities. Using this starting point to begin implementing an arts practice that grounds itself in the dialogical and the social could expand the possibilities for interspecies engagement, and aid in tackling the disconnection between human and other. A social-specific practice could then be seen as an attempt to level the playing field between and within different collectives of a society, recognising other actors and uncovering hidden groupings already in existence, but not yet valued, by presenting them as valid members of the specific society. A collective can then be described, in the most basic sense, as a group of individuals bound together through geographical, social, or emotion ties which create some sense of 'being *in* common'. This definition allows for all creatures to be encompassed within it, but needs further defining to lead to the realisation that collectives can and do develop across species. The human body for example is not a singular entity; it is a community of its own, working with the geographical constraints of a physical form. If humans became aware of their own bodily collective, their microbiome, then this alteration in thinking could have an effect at a human to human level, enabling a sensitivity and understanding of all beings that contribute to the human element of society, allowing potential for equality to develop. If it can be realised that all individuals are part of the biosphere of existence and should be allowed adequate space and opportunity to act, equality could increase along with the resilience of the system. Bennett recognises a need for an understanding that the human flesh is "constituted and populated by different swarms of foreigners"<sup>21</sup>, and questions "if we were more attentive to the indispensable foreignness that we are, would we continue

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 112.



to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?"<sup>22</sup> Her call for us to acknowledge the others in our collective microbiome in order to improve our overall health, leads to a realisation that it is necessary to understand the possibilities of equality that enable those within a specific collective to 'act', both independently and dependently of the others when defining a collective. Therefore we must learn to listen to, allow for and accept the possibility of others 'acting' in relation to ourselves, our bodily collectives and the collective eco-systems in which we reside.

Although the term collective could be seen to be fairly concrete in regards to its focus on members acting, cooperating, sharing and benefiting from each other, it is important to remember that as with all situations involving the social as associations, a collective, as previously stated, should also be seen in fluid terms, as a process that is continually changing and restructuring and thus cannot be defined so clearly. The creation of or interaction with a collective comes from the desire of the individuals involved to enter into a dialogue with one another, thus an awareness of the other is paramount to this possibility. There needs to be an exchange for a collective to exist, exchange being a sharing with or acknowledgement of the other. Perhaps it is then unclear how a human could have an exchange with their own bacteria for example, however, exchanges are happening all the time through varying states of health. As elements of a human body become ill, those elements will increase or influence a mental and physical awareness of the need to rest. Therefore, as a human, acknowledging this need and resting continues the exchange between the human mind and its collective body. It may be possible to improve overall eco-system health, benefiting all human and nonhuman actors that rely on it, by working to increase a receptive response between elements within a collective or society. With this in mind, it seems necessary to develop a practice that helps to uncover or discover the actors present in a situation in order to create that awareness and thus the opportunity and ability to have an exchange, and to notice and respond appropriately to signs of distress and bad health.

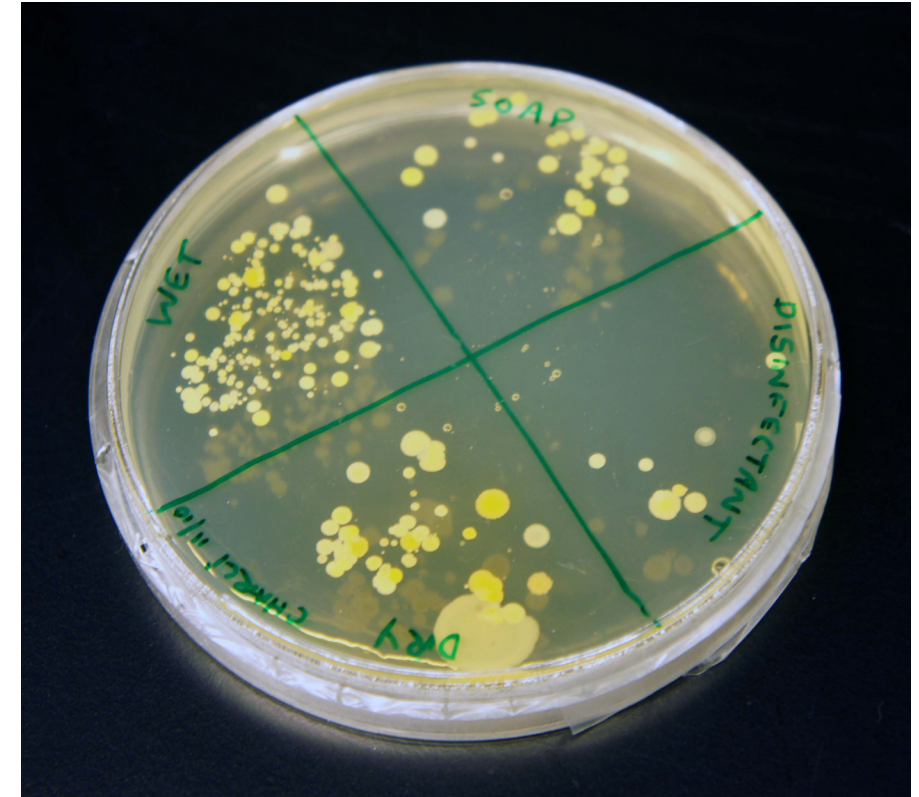


Fig. 6. Bodily bacteria, 2013, bacteria cultivated from my hands to visualise the 'array of bodies' that I share my body with, even after I have cleaned them.

<sup>22</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 113.





Fig. 7. Ahmet Öğüt, *The Silent University*. 2012.

### Chapter 3: Historical Precedents for Social-specificity

When considering the possibilities of art as an influence for social change it is hard to ignore the similarities and correlations between the practices and tools that some artists with social-specific practices employ alongside those of activists. Perhaps a clear distinction between the two is the extent that the intended outcome of the action proposed or initiated by the individual or group is made obvious. For example, activists must be very clear and direct about the change they want to see in the world, artists on the other hand can be more subtle, allowing a collaboration to develop over time to potentially reach a common understanding surrounding an issue or idea. Activism focuses the majority of its energy on bringing about change through dealing with political institutions directly, with an awareness that through policy change comes social change, with little regard for their position in aesthetic history. Activist art or artivism however, is created within a larger construction or framework, the art world. Positioned as an off shoot, in the sub-category of political art within the broader field of critical art, the artists that practice it are aware of the aesthetic and historical context in which it is embedded. Activists believe that fighting for improvement through policy is the most influential and direct route for change. This is not without truth and artists “need to be aware that critical art practices, in whatever form they are conceived, are no substitute for political practices and that they will never be able, on their own, to bring about a new hegemonic order”<sup>1</sup>. However, through focusing on the philosophical state of the individual members of a collective that have the ability to act, slower, but potentially more radical change can be achieved. Through developing cultural norms and expectations of society to become aligned with an understanding of the human within the natural system, not outside of it, it may be possible to develop the critical mass that is needed to influence policy change through the realisation of other actants, thus bringing about a cross examination of

<sup>1</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art,” in *Truth is Concrete*, 73.

current acceptable behaviours. The bill for same sex marriage recently came into existence in Western Europe, for example, because of a development in understanding and acceptability within society that was not apparent 50 years ago. This is because philosophical and ethical ideas surrounding human rights have moved forward and it is no longer acceptable, as it once was, to exclude these people from the right to marry. Perhaps the same can be achieved in the future with regards to policies related to environmental degradation and ecosystem health with a convincing enough argument.

We believe that the biggest crisis we're living through right now is not the crisis of images but of the imagination; it is about how to imagine ourselves into another economic system, breaking stereotypes and hierarchies. This is a crisis in the emotional connection between art and society, between life and desire, the individual body and the social body. In this catastrophic history of capitalism, we feel that art can help to produce the kind of things that could be done by everyone were they just to recover the ability to imagine. But the question is whether to use that tool to repeat a life we don't want any more or, collectively, to try and imagine other forms of life and society.<sup>2</sup>

Art that deals directly with political issues has its merits, such as directing funding towards important social and moral issues that have previously been neglected or ignored by popular policy. Work with this agenda is usually developed out of the consumerist realm of the art world and controlled gallery format, and due to the diverse issues it attempts to discuss, highlight and/or effect, it is equally diverse in methodology, using many platforms to execute the projects and desires of the creators or collaborators. From mimicking injustice, like artist Santiago Serra and his work *250cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*, 1999, highlighting an individual's dependence and lack of financial control in Cuba, or imagining anew, like Ahmet Ögüt, with the creation of a new institutional framework "The Silent University". Ögüt's utopian approach contrasts Serra's method, providing a knowledge source and refuge for those in society that are very knowledgeable, but come with an undocumented or unrecognised academic background. "The Silent University" disregards both language and legal barriers, trading only in skills share and time exchange.

2 Etcétera et al., "Sketching a History of Art and Activism" in *Truth is Concrete*, 55.

Alternatively, Serra's approach exposes the realities that exist in society with a powerful statement, presenting the current state of affairs in Cuba to shock people to act and improve the given situation. Both artists raise questions with their work through exploring and evaluating how the world is currently functioning, attempting to directly or indirectly change it for the better. In this chapter social-specific art will be positioned within the context of works like this, within the category of critical art and in relation to other critical art sub-categories.

### The Rise of Critical Art

Critical art, in broad terms, can be said to be an attempt to understand and evaluate how the world functions, by "building awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation"<sup>3</sup>. It is unlike purely aesthetic art, for example, which is largely concerned with materials, colour and form, as in this case the socio-political problems of the world seem secondary to the quest for a certain aesthetic. Although both art forms are philosophical, critical art can also be seen as political, dealing more directly with pressing contemporary issues, acknowledging and affirming a type of art that "no longer tries to respond to an excess of commodities and signs but rather to a lack of bonds"<sup>4</sup>. However, due to the diversity of art forms emerging from this field, the term critical art should be used as an umbrella in which sub-categories can be positioned. These sub-categories should include, among others: political art, socially engaged art, participatory art, relational art and social-specific art. The differences between these various sub-categories may sometimes seem small, but it is important to recognise the differing starting points and objectives on which they are based. Political art, for example, attempts perhaps to have the most direct impact, using a variety of tactics to reclaim public space and speak out about specific injustices. Protesting and other forms of violent or non-violent activism can be used as a medium of art, although art with activist intent is not a prerequisite for this category. Its main goal is to make the public aware of particular social, environmental or political problems that concern them, through the physical

3 Jacques Rancière, "Problems and Transformations in Critical Art," in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 45.

4 Ibid., 57.

presence of a publically sited work without the need for public participation<sup>5</sup>.

Although socially engaged art, like political art, has activist tendencies, its primary focus is on collaboration, aiming to co-create work with specific communities or groups to comment critically on social systems or situations in need of change in the hope that the art will act as a catalyst for transformation, arguing that art “rehumanizes—or at least de-alienates—a society rendered numb or fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism”<sup>6</sup>. Participatory art moves even further away from an obvious political agenda to change the world, focusing more specifically on the audience or participants that are needed to complete the work, seeming more concerned with challenging the way art is created in the West. This approach has been criticised as the audience can easily become just the “medium and material [... with the artwork not needing] to happen in consensus with the people involved”<sup>7</sup>, using the public as paint and canvas, vital to creation, enabling the artwork and thus the artist, to exist. Relational art however, is perhaps more similar to socially engaged art in its desire to engage collaboratively with people, but is also concerned with the creation of connections, rather than an obvious political agenda. In *Relational Aesthetics*, curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud<sup>8</sup> notes that “[a]rt is the place that produces a specific sociability”<sup>9</sup> and “is a state of encounter”<sup>10</sup> and although this type of work is, like participatory art, somewhat critical of art production in the West, its focus lies with the possibilities of collaboration with individuals through the creation of “alternative forms of social bonds”<sup>11</sup>. Achieving its goals by creating places or settings to instigate new or uncommon human to human interactions. Lastly, social-specific art, as defined in the previous chapter is different again, as although it grounds itself in attempting

5 Nina Felshin, introduction to *But is it art? In the Spirit of Art as Activism*, ed. Nina Felshin, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 21.

6 Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents” *Artforum*, February, 2006, 180.

7 Malzacher, *The Truth is Concrete*, 18.

8 Nicolas Bourriaud is a French curator and art critic whose publication *Relational Aesthetics* became a highly significant text for many artists in the ‘social turn’ of the 1990’s, influencing the work of many European artists forming their practices at that time.

9 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 16.

10 Ibid., 18.

11 Claire Doherty, *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2004), 46.

to catalyse change through co-creating work with specific communities as with socially engaged art, it is specifically interested in unearthing the underlying connections that shape the social space and society. As with relational aesthetics, it attempts to engage individuals through moments of interaction and it is concerned with exploring the social situation of the human to human. As well as human to human, it ventures further to engage with relationships formed between the human and nonhuman actants, acting throughout each situation, and thus helps to increase and acknowledge the presence of others, through the creation of the artwork.

### Paving the Way for Social-specificity

The practice of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison could be described within the context of critical art, perhaps nestled between political and relational ideals. It has spanned over 40 years and been dedicated to increasing awareness, instigating and effecting environmental change at a personal and political level. Believing that an artist can “transcend political boundaries and conceptual divisions that make it impossible to confront the causes of environmental problems”<sup>12</sup>, the Harrisons have worked to improve their natural surroundings since the 1970s. Lagoon Cycle, The Serpentine Lattice, The Endangered Meadows of Europe and more recently Greenhouse Britain, are examples that base themselves at the level of genuine problem solving, working both outside of the gallery format to initiate environmental change and within the gallery format of exhibitions as public outreach and information distribution. Although there are many examples throughout the Harrisons’ career, *Atempause: Breathing Space for the Sava River (Atempause für den Save Fluss)*, 1989-1990, is a thought-provoking one, as it shows the ability of an artwork to create and sustain conversations between different communities with different values and interests concerning a specific environmental situation. Through posing the idea of creating a ‘nature corridor’ protecting the Sava River, which was potentially threatened by development, along with its many endangered species and ancient farming community, they created what they define as a “Conversational Drift” involving many different ‘actors’ able to influence the future of the land: water department officials,

12 Felshin, *But is it art?*, 162.





TOP: Fig. 8. Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Atempause: Breathing Space for the Sava River* (*Atempause für den Save Fluss*), 1989-1990.

BOTTOM: Fig. 9. Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *A corridor through the wetland oak forest* from *Atempause: Breathing Space for the Sava River* (*Atempause für den Save Fluss*).

environmentalists, ecologists and the local farming community. By arguing that “the artist’s habits of metaphor, cross reference, inclusiveness and holistic thinking may help unclog a discourse that often finds itself mired in narrow channels of technological and bureaucratic thinking”<sup>13</sup> the Harrisons make a case for the importance of framing their work and the discourse they create around specific environmental issues as art. The practice of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison can be seen as one of the stepping stones towards the development of social-specific art. Through working across a number of different social groups, the Harrisons have acknowledged the need for a more rounded planning process. Although, in this case the various actors they have involved are all human, they have begun to understand the complexity of the problems they are dealing with by working to create connections between some of the actors engaged with the Sara River. Through developing dialogues with individuals unlikely to converse otherwise, they have been able to assert power through this conversational drift. Their success in creating ‘alternative social bonds’ and new connections across groups can be used as a starting point for art that aims to engage with the social as associations. It shows the possibilities for change when various connections are acknowledged within a problematic environmental situation, and thus paves the way for social-specific practice to develop, looking at the potential impact and positive outcomes made possible through increasing awareness of the social bonds that exist across human and nonhuman actants.

Joseph Beuys can also be seen as an artist who helped lay foundations for this type of practice, whose work also falls within the category of critical art and can be perhaps positioned between socially engaged and relational practices. Beuys is commonly known for the development and prevalence of social-sculpture; how humans mould and shape the world in which they live, and education as artwork. He was a believer in the dialogue that art can help instigate to influence social change, proclaiming it as “a power that gathers, withholds and shapes humanity. This is the artist’s task, because art is fed by all that society condemns, excludes, sets aside and forgets”<sup>14</sup>. He was convinced that a new understanding of society would improve the social, economic and environmental problems humanity was careering towards then, and still faces

<sup>13</sup> Felshin, *But is it art?*, 143.

<sup>14</sup> Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Beuys Voice* (Zürich: Kunsthaus Zürich, 2011), 33.



today. Admittedly, his new understanding was still heavily entrenched within human culture, believing that “it is only the human capacity for thought that can bring new causes into the world”<sup>15</sup>. However at the same time, he seemed aware that nonhuman life played an important and potentially creative role within this very society he dreamed of, noting that “creativity is not an exclusively human privilege. In another context a tree might, for example, have its own specific energies within the domains of thought, feeling and will”<sup>16</sup>.

Beuys is usually remembered for his interest in democracy and belief that each man is an artist<sup>17</sup>, referring “to the capacity one has to express, to fulfil something, to bring about; and recognizing that this ability to carry out a task is artistic in character”<sup>18</sup>, seeing creativity and spirituality as a way out of capitalism. Within this capitalist context, Beuys was also very interested in the changing agricultural situation. He believed that developing a connection with one’s food system was vital to man’s relationship with Earth and was concerned that the rise in industrialised agriculture and use of chemical products was poisoning the human relationship with the land, as much as it was their physical bodies. Beuys saw that when a plant was seen as purely

<sup>15</sup> De Domizio Durini, *Beuys Voice*, 240.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 246-247. In a discussion between Beuys and fellow artist Jannis Kounellis, in Basel in 1985, Beuys confirmed his definition of every man as artist, alongside his belief in the power of art and societal change.

“Beuys: There are farmers who are artists and who grow potatoes.

Kounellis: They are not subversive artists.

Beuys: How can you say a thing like that? If a man can try out something real; if he can develop a product of vital importance from within the earth, then you have to consider him as a creative being with that field. In that sense you have to accept him as an artist.

Kounellis: Producing potatoes is a type of cultivation that is not part of the same culture as literature.

Beuys: Naturally it is not the same culture as literature... or is it an art different to the art of painting.

Kounellis: No, not art: culture. Obviously here I understand Beuys, who himself places potatoes in museums.

Beuys: The difficulty is that we are working with different concepts. I work with a widened concept of art, with the concept of social culture (which is the most important form of art).

Kounellis is still taking about art in the traditional sense [...] Let’s finally try to find a system that transforms the entire social organism into a work of art, which embraces the entire process of work [...], as well as agriculture, educational sciences and technology; so that there is a real quality to the entire principle of production and consumption. One must transform not simply the way paintings or sculpture are made but rather the whole form of society. It is an enormous project.”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 222.

mechanical, “as a simple machine: suffice to nourish it with something and it will subsequently grow and give people food to eat”<sup>19</sup>, it created space for unrestrained capitalist agendas to take control and profit to be made the main goal in its production.

[A]s soon as we broaden our Sight and also look at mankind’s invisible aims and goals, then we also glimpse the invisible ends of the plant, its being put within an entire universe which envelops it on a cosmic level [...]. The age of chemical agriculture, with the sole effect of poisoning the Earth, must come to an end, so that something can be born which allows people to live and which does not oblige them to die.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 10. Joseph Beuys, *Überwindet endlich die Parteiendiktatur!* (Dictatorship by the party!). 1969.

Beuys believed that in educating people through creativity about these social,

<sup>19</sup> De Domizio Durini, *Beuys Voice*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 157.



ecological problems, he could help ‘broaden their sight’, often stating that “the most important thing is to create the world as an artwork [...] social engagement is definitely implicit in ecological restitution”<sup>21</sup>. He also believed that writing was key to continuing the formation of thoughts and ideas, using chalkboards to engage people with words alongside the physical form of his artworks. In 1973, Beuys initiated the F.I.U, the Free International University, aiming to use it to reflect on direct democracy, to “study the meaning of the problems posed by a new society [...] it is a Permanent Assembly in which the most diverse problems—such as creativity, spirituality, law, the ecological party, etc—can be posed. This is the resultant position of art, formulating the basis for a new society through written texts—a theory that all can master and then discuss”<sup>22</sup>. Through understanding Beuys’s interests and the goals he set himself throughout his career as an artist, correlations between his practice and that of a social-specific one start to become visible. Beuys still used the terms man and nature and had some conflicting ways of seeing certain nonhuman actants in relation to parts of my practice presented in chapter 4; for example, he viewed a bee society as one organism as opposed to a group of individuals working together, “a socialist organism in which all parts function as a living body”<sup>23</sup>. However, like Helen and Newton Harrison, he believed in the value of exchange, of knowledge production and of social relations as a force to replenish control to the public, and thus enable real democracy to emerge.

Through social-sculpture in practice, Beuys wanted to free people from the constraints that society imposed on them, to re-educate, to rediscover and reanimate democracy. “What I am striving to do is to reveal a vision of the future in which we are sure, one day, to see valid principles for the organisation of society”<sup>24</sup>. He believed in the power of society and saw its reformation a necessity to social change. He also began to explore and uncover the extent to which the modern day agricultural practices and food systems, that have been set up to ‘take care’ of humanity, have actually disabled and disempowered those within that society. Throughout Beuys’s extensive career he always

21 John K. Grant, *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 161.

22 De Domizio Durini, *Beuys Voice*, 202.

23 Ibid., 224.

24 Ibid., 213.

put an emphasis and importance on social exchanges between humans, alongside what seems to be, a quest for social interactions with other organic agencies or beings. *Diary of Seychelles*, *7000 Oaks* and the *Defence of Nature Operation*, *100 Days of the F.I.U* and *I Like America and America Likes Me*, are just a few examples of his artworks that engaged people and others in or with political, environmental or social situations that concerned Beuys throughout his lifetime. In regards to Beuys and his impact on the formation of social-specific practice, it is not one or two of his artworks that have helped in the development of such a notion, but rather, his whole career and way of thinking, as a man and as an artist, with his poetic thoughts and relentless belief in the importance of communication and the power of education. “It is time to replace the systems of ‘organised irresponsibility’ with an alternative based on equilibrium and solidarity”<sup>25</sup>, a quote which could be understood, in modern vital materialist thinking, as a demand to replace the hegemonic system that tries to control the environment and the actants within it, with an alternative one, a collective based on balance, acknowledgement and support.

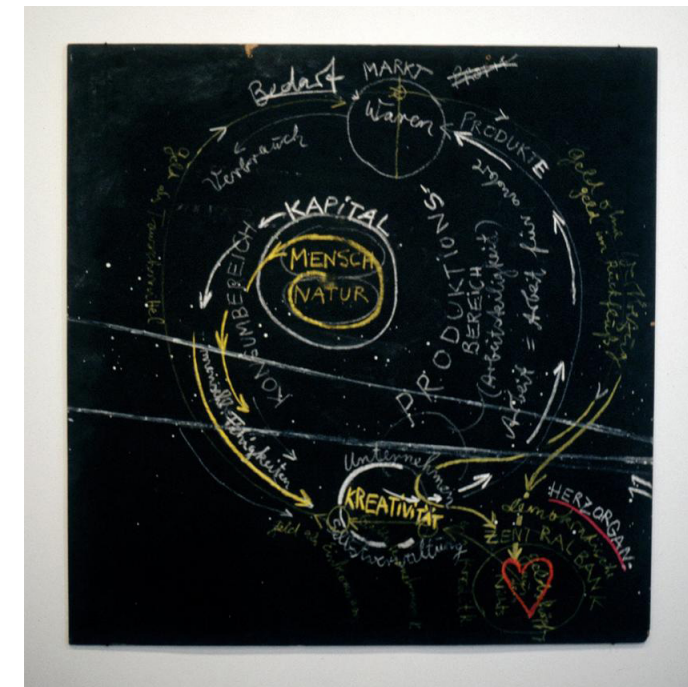


Fig. 11. Joseph Beuys, *Panel XI*. 1982.

25 De Domizio Durini, *Beuys Voice*, 45.

Although Beuys touched on various complexities and problems of having an industrialised food system within many of his artworks, teachings and discussions, his direct interventions and social engagement with the public, on this issue and many others, revolved around dialogical exchange and creating innovative artworks within the traditional practices of performance, land art, installation and sculpture. However, there are now a number of collectives embracing continually developing technologies and biological experimentation for the purpose of raising similar issues concerning democracy, control and food politics today. The Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) are a group of individuals who, despite having art in their title, prefer to be referred to as ‘a collective of five tactical media practitioners’<sup>26</sup>, rather than artists. They believe, due to ‘modern market demands’ wanting “individuals with lots of skills for maximum exploitation”, that a lone artist is expected to be too many things “produce in any medium, write well enough for publication, be verbally articulate, [...] be a capable public speaker, a career administrator”<sup>27</sup>, so on and so forth. Therefore, they create art as a collective to allow them to meet the expectations of the industry. CAE believe that “collective action also helps alleviate the intensity of alienation born of an overly rationalized and instrumentalized culture” and maintain the view that “‘artists’ research into alternative forms of social organization is just as important as the traditional research into materials, processes, and products”<sup>28</sup>. Their opinion that artistic research needs to extend beyond the field of what is traditionally expected of art and into other disciplines, strengthens and helps justify the basis of social-specific art that engages and acknowledges philosophical ideas pertaining to sociology and applies them within the context of art.

Despite the fact the CAE does not claim officially that they are artists when describing their collective, they often work within a gallery context and use artistic funding to create work and therefore should be acknowledged within the category of critical art in relation to art history. Although they are perhaps more overtly activist with their works than socially engaged, they still have

26 “Critical Art Ensemble,” Critical Art Ensemble, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://www.critical-art.net/home.html>.

27 Critical Art Ensemble, “Observations On Collective Cultural Action,” *Art Journal* 57, 2(1998): 74. Accessed April 10, 2015. <http://www.cs.cornell.edu/~nak44/pdfs/CAEObservationsOnCollectiveCulturalAction.pdf>.

28 *Ibid.*, 85.

an interest in audience participation and conversation with the public, as opposed to purely informational outreach, often inviting the viewer to engage with scientific practices within an artistic setting. *Free Range Grain*, (2003-04) is an interesting project CAE developed in collaboration with Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-shiun Shyu, in relation to the movement towards the concept of social-specific practice. CAE set up a simple laboratory within a gallery space and invited members of the public to bring food products and join them in testing for ‘common genetic modifications’. Through this direct engagement with the audience, CAE wanted to “bring issues of food purity into the realm of public discourse”<sup>29</sup> and demystify biotechnological production.



Fig. 12. Critical Art Ensemble, Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-shiun Shyu, *Free Range Grain*. 2003-04.

They believe that by making science routine through the physical act of doing the scientific process together in public they can increase awareness of ‘public science’ and focus on “issues (such as food production) that are of direct interest to people, and so contribute to making the meaning of scientific initiatives immediate and concrete, as opposed to the vague abstractions they tend to be”<sup>30</sup>. Again, like the Harrisons and Beuys, the CAE are consistent in

29 “Free Range Grain,” Critical Art Ensemble, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://www.critical-art.net/FRG.html>.

30 *Ibid.*

their belief that education and knowledge exchange can help improve social issues or situations for the individuals involved. Through inviting individuals to test food products for GM traces, they enter a conversation that starts to acknowledge invisible actants that may be influencing the wider food system. Through allowing individuals to test their seemingly passive ingredients and see the invisible made visible, through genetics, they begin to shift the dialogue away from a completely human centred environment and towards the physical influence of the vegetable or other food product being tested. The audience member is then reminded that the object has genes and that those genes are absorbed by their body through consumption, enabling them to recognise once more the vibrant materiality of the food item and question the effect it will have on the individual that consumes it.

**GM** food  
We bring good things to life



**Free Range Grain**  
A project by Critical Art Ensemble  
Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-shiun Shyu

Fig. 13. Critical Art Ensemble, Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-shiun Shyu, *Free Range Grain*. 2003-04.

Each practice discussed here contains one or more of the elements needed

for the development of a social-specific practice. The Harrisons, who have been able to alter and improve environmental situations through the bringing together of different elements acting and influencing the specific environmental problem, be they all human within their practice, have laid the foundations for a way of working that extends the 'bringing together' to include nonhuman actors that are often ignored, but are inevitably involved in any given situation. Beuys's contribution is his belief in the power of skills and knowledge exchange, alongside his expanded idea concerning what constitutes a creative act, which has enabled the practice of social-specificity to broaden its definition of creativity and concentrate on enabling exchanges between humans, as well as human and nonhuman actants. Finally, the Critical Art Ensemble, have strengthened the argument for increasing accessibility of information and development of skills, so that individuals can make themselves aware of some of the complexities of current issues. By working to make invisible changes, i.e. genetic modification, visible, they have been able to increase public awareness of one of the hidden layers within the act of consuming. These artists have helped progress key precedents relevant to the development of a social-specific practice: engagement, discourse and exchange. Although none of these artists recognised the nonhuman directly through their work, they have used interesting tactics which can be learned from and developed into new strategies to engage others in dialogues around current environmental issues. My social-specific practice expands the Harrisons approach of creating conversational drifts outwards by attempting to engage people in conversations beyond the human. It redirects Beuys's ideas of societal reform and faith in the power of creativity for democracy towards a faith that creativity can help to develop an understanding of communality and collective existence through my own research into sociological theories. Due to a particular interest in how we understand food and drink, and the systems in place to create them, CAE's informational sharing strategy has increased my conviction of the importance of knowledge and has lead me to the conclusion that through creating skills shares, and therefore knowledge exchanges, I can strengthen bonds between others. My practice builds upon these artistic precedents in relation to an expanded notion of society and the social in an attempt to reduce the environmental destructive behaviours of modern humanity, agreeing with the basic principles of the artists above, but differing in my intent to share the focus across the human-nonhuman collective.





## Chapter 4: Social-specificity as Arts Practice

In this chapter I will present my practice through three artworks developed in the context of social-specificity. My work is concerned with issues related to specific collectives or groups of individuals with an awareness of social theories relating to Bruno Latour's actants and Jane Bennett's vital materiality. Through engaging or collaborating with others, the position I have adopted with my understanding of a wider social-specific realm, is to reconnect and rethink relationships that have formed between humans and their most basic need for food and drink. The focus of my artworks has been to question the human relationship with consumables in the context of contemporary social and environmental issues, relating them to the collective that has engaged, been created or become apparent to others through the process. My recent projects deal with ideas of consumption through creation of counter consumerist market products, discussion and raising awareness of citizens' rights to protect prime agricultural land and an analysis of a societal history and food exchange we control and often take for granted.

My projects engaged different collectives with different consumables and are examples of works that acknowledge the influence of others in the consumable industries. Through revealing the constraints and possibilities of the nonhuman actors enabling the existence of certain food products, my practice, in part, challenges a sense of security. It highlights the lack of control humans have over the ability to make such products, whilst aiming to empower individuals to set up and take part in these human-nonhuman relationships through the production of their own food products. Broadly speaking, for a practice to be social-specific it does not need to engage with the basic needs of food or consumption as such, but does need to root itself in acknowledging the nonhuman when tackling issues that are specific to a group or social situation. However food, in this case, is the issue that I have been exploring through the artworks due to my lifelong interest and continuous public and personal quest



to understand the complex ethics of eating<sup>1</sup>. When thinking more generally about the merits and constraints of a social-specific practice it is important to note that it should always be in collaboration and should not be attempted alone because of the associations that social-specific situations demand. The social problems<sup>2</sup> that humanity faces now and will continue to face in the coming decades require holistic thinking. As a lone individual, it cannot be expected that every facet of a problem will be seen or questioned, however through this method of working and thinking together, discoveries and solutions can and should be attempted with others. Through collaboration the co-authors and I can acknowledge and effect each other, shaping ideas and methods for change and discussion together.

Within the wider context of social-specificity, it is important to recognise the co-workers within any situation or artwork and, for believers in vital materialism, it could be argued that all artworks will have co-authors embedded in the materials and tools used to create the work. However, for a social-specific practice, the bodies engaged in the making are recognised by the awareness of a society through social histories; a constraint confirmed in chapter 1, enabling the notion of social as associations to be applicable. The benefits of recognising and engaging with these others and creating work in a co-authored manner include the possibility to widen perspectives in relation to living life on Earth within such an interconnected collective, to have a positive impact as opposed to a damaging one, alongside learning how to cope with problems related to the environment and changes in Earth's eco-systems. By displacing the importance of the individual towards the collective through my projects, I aim to counter an increase in individualism previously mentioned<sup>3</sup>. Among other

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1 I have always been a vegetarian, brought up with the understanding that the industrialisation of livestock and the meat industries are damaging the Earth from an environmental perspective, due to water wastage, methane gases, land use etc. However, I am now questioning whether 'vegetarianism' is healthy, and if an increase in the amount of openly vegetarian individuals is to do with more than the freedom to choose. Perhaps, it is also a response to the lack of direct contact and physical understanding of the cycle of life and a reduced influence over the production of our food.

2 Social problems also include environmental problems as discussed previously in chapter 2: Social-specific or Site-specific. Social needs to involve the environment within its definition to help further the human understanding that everything is interlinked and thus the environment cannot be seen as separate. Social and environmental ills are interconnected and must be thought of in this way.

3 Mentioned in the first paragraph of Fuelling Society, p. 7.

evidence, a correlation has been noticed by researchers in recent studies in the United States between a reduction in communal living and an increase in the use of words such as 'own' and 'I' in literature, which they report as part proof of a growing trend in individualism<sup>4</sup>. Through starting dialogues involving numerous actors, human and nonhuman, I hope to expand the focus from one individual towards the many others that are required for my practice, dealing with different aspects of the human disconnection with food in relation to the other actors present.

### **Practical Application: Method of Practice**

During the creation of these artworks I have noticed that a method of practice has naturally developed which follows a certain way of thinking and doing, and runs throughout each project. This method has evolved along with a specific interest in consumables, however it could lend itself to expansion or extension to deal with other important social issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. Depending on my collaborator(s), other elements and themes have been explored alongside my aim to increase an awareness of an actor and this diversity of interests within a common theme has been one of the positive outcomes of creating artworks with others. Each of the collaborators have been involved in different ways and at different stages of the making process whether that be during creation of concept, development and execution or both.

It is important to note, with regards to my individual practice, that before attempting to instigate any of the social-specific art projects, it has been necessary to have first become personally aware of my connection with the actants I want to work with or aim to highlight through collaborations with others. It has been important to develop my own relationship and awareness of the actor in a particular situation, through the act of doing, as only then have I been able to understand its impact and share this experience with others. For example, I come from a family of beer brewers and bread makers, therefore yeast is an actor that I had worked with before and acknowledged, to some

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4 I. Grossmann, and M. E. W. Varnum, "Social Structure, Infectious Diseases, Disasters, Secularism, and Cultural Change in America," *Psychological Science* 26, 3(2015): 311-324. Accessed May 15, 2015. doi:10.1177/0956797614563765.

extent, for a number of years prior to producing the collaboration *Take One Down*. However, although I had prior knowledge of working with yeasts, each yeast acts differently and has different needs for survival. This meant I was initially wary of the first batch of beer brewed with SAFBREW T-58, a yeast which was new to me. I realised then the importance of being aware of the physical and bodily experience that the actors share within a given situation in order to be able to understand and share it with others. I understood that, although I was confident in creating beer in the most basic sense and could guess the behaviour of the yeast, I would have been more confident in my ability to help others to become aware of, and form a personal relationship to the chosen actor, in this case SAFBREW T-58, if I had already experienced that specific yeast for myself prior to working with the choir.

It was not until I started *Take One Down*, with the aim of questioning the vibrancy of the yeast and how the act of relinquishing control over a product effected my relationship to and understanding of my position within the human/beer interaction, that I began to see how Latour's and Bennett's ideas concerning the agency and vibrancy of others could be made visible and applied to everyday life, through the creation of our own consumables. It then became clear that due to the industrialisation of agriculture we have become detached and removed from one of the most important cycles in life, the cycling of nutrients. I might even argue that the increase in individualism, feelings of alienation and even the fear of death, could be attributed in part to a disconnection with the cycle of nutrients and thus the cycle of life. In farming, life and death go hand in hand, nothing is waste and nothing is wasted, actors go from interacting in an active and conscious way to a more passive state, but the interaction is never ending, old life enables opportunities for new life and so the cycle continues. However, due to the time, knowledge and spatial constraints of contemporary life, an increasing number of modern people are removed from this experience. Each of the actors that I have chosen to highlight through the art projects became apparent to me prior to any art being created. It was either developing my sense of empowerment by observing the foam and bubbles in a fermentation tub or picking and eating radishes straight from the soil, or through a eureka moment, discovering the beautiful, complex and hidden microscopic world of pollen. This empowerment or eureka moment I felt, urged me to share my experiences with others through the creative process. Once I had become aware of the importance of my relationship with

a specific actor, I continued developing my level of understanding towards my chosen actors before the other projects began. After the actor was decided, it was then necessary to find a collective to work with which would acknowledge it with me.

When thinking about who to engage with a chosen actor it was important to consider, particularly when planning to work with people for an extended period of time, a group that however tenuously, had a connection or relation to that actor, or at least a product the actor helps to produce or preserve. In a world of information overload, an initial spark or underlying interest can be the difference between avoidance and engagement. If I was interested in exploring the importance of worms for our soils and thus our possibility to grow vegetables for example, it could be interesting, as Bennett has noted, to look to Charles Darwin's observations that worms 'make history' by protecting artefacts through the creation of soil, "for which archaeologists ought to be grateful"<sup>5</sup>. By extending an invitation to a historical society, museum enthusiasts or a metal detecting club with the view that creating an understanding that the worms not only enable their hobby to exist, but also their physical ability to exist on Earth, it could be possible to strengthen the desire to make that connection and continue to acknowledge these actants once the artistic collaboration has come to fruition. In *Take One Down*, the choir agreed and continued to actively make beer for the duration of six weeks. Their initial desire to make a product they already enjoyed together sustained their interest and made it possible to form a relationship with the yeast. *Blue Fingers* engaged crafters with soil by sparking an interest through crochet, something that they were already familiar with and their pairing with growers has resulted in one of the crafters becoming a regular volunteer on the food growing site of Feed Bristol. The initial connection between the individual and the activity has been crucial to the production of my projects so far and thus I see it as important to the development of any project attempting to work in this way.

After identifying this connection between a chosen collective and an actor, I saw a space for a creative act to be introduced to bind the two together. My definition of what this act could be was broad and in the spirit of Beuys

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Action of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits*, (London: John Murray, 1881), 308. Bennett also uses this example when discussing worms as members of the public in *Vibrant Matter*, 95.

when proclaiming each man as an artist and in his defence of potato farming<sup>6</sup> as a creative act. Whatever outcome the collaboration manifested, it was important that there was a physical exchange, a tangible thing that was created or at least experienced during the interaction between the actor, the collective that engaged and myself. Whether this exchange was based in skills share, product production, sensual experience or something else, the key was that the invisible presence of the actor was made in some way, shape or form visible through the physical presence of an object or other outcome. This object was either made for consumption to share with a wider group of people in the case of *Take One Down* and *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* and *Translating Histories*, or made to last, as an item to remind people of the actors they have been engaged with through the process in *Blue Fingers*. It was during *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* and *Translating Histories* that many of the collaborators were introduced near the end of the creative process and thus the main act was an experience as opposed to the creation of concept or making of physical object. This created a dispersed collective that were unaware of many of the others experiences bar the comments left behind on the blackboards. Therefore these blackboards were necessary to retain some essence of other people for the possibility of a collective experience to be hinted at and potentially achieved.

Through creating this variety of projects I am now confident that the awareness of an actor within any given system will be different in each situation and will be dependent on many factors including the collective that I have chosen or will chose to work with, or that has chosen me. At present I have no self-imposed constraints in regards to how the awareness should be brought about or discussed within a grouping, for what is important, as the Harrisons would put it, is that a conversational drift is allowed to happen between humans, and hopefully also between humans and nonhumans. Through the unearthing of actants important to the given situation the project involves, the individuals engaged in the work were given information to enable them to act with a regard for those actants in the future; those actants, in the case of my example projects and explained in more detail in the following pages, being yeast, soil and bees. Through pointing out the actors behind each consumable, I have started to shift the focus from the human presence in the creation of a product

<sup>6</sup> See p.36, footnote 17, for Beuys's defence of potato farming as a creative act.

to the actors that are necessary for the product to be created. At the moment, it is normal to thank the brewer as opposed to the yeast when drinking a beer without a consideration that the beer would not exist without the presence of the yeast working to convert the sugar to alcohol. The same goes for many other products including the gratitude paid to the farmer, who works very hard to make his land profitable, but could not have grown the vegetables, and thus fed the consumer, without fertile soil, microbes and worms playing an active part in the process. Lastly, it seems that much of the appreciation goes to the beekeeper for the liquid gold, those who are just the mere collectors of honey, a substance so complex that it is hard to comprehend the physical endurance of a bee in the making of a single teaspoon.

Before I present the three projects created within the framework of social-specificity, in which I identify my work to be placed, I must reiterate three important elements that have become apparent during the practical application of creating work to recognise actors. These elements come into play when the actions of actants are observed and acknowledged, and they are history, time and patience. I had previously theorised the necessity of history, acting as an important stepping stone towards Latour's ANT, however it was not until I began creating the works that I saw the other possibilities that it created. The act of consuming food items produced in an individual's locality within a seasonal framework is nowadays fairly uncommon, however I would argue that through doing such a thing, we could develop or increase a historical and bodily knowledge that cannot be explained or learnt by scanning the internet or reading a book; the history of a piece of land revealed, not through words, but through the absorption of vitamins, minerals and other earthly matter from the vicinity we inhabit. Through planting, fertilising and working a piece of land over a number of years, a physical understanding and experience can be acquired, enabling that individual to develop an awareness of the other organisms that reside there, the climate and the changes that occur across seasons, and thus a deeper understanding of the implications of tarmacking over it. By consuming local honey our bodies can experience the nutrition of the plants from the summer just gone and therefore acquire bodily knowledge of the locality. If we could grow food from the soil and squeeze drink from the fruit of the trees of our locality as well, then we would very possibly develop a new or rather, relearn a lost relationship with the environment that surrounds us.

Although I will discuss time and patience later in the context of the individual projects, it is important to give an overview of their significance in relation to creating human understanding and appreciation for other planetary beings. To be able to drink beer and eat vegetables or honey, time plays an essential role as one cannot plant a seed in soil and eat a vegetable shortly after. Through the physical act of doing and therefore becoming aware of different food based processes, it became apparent that working to rediscover patience and an awareness of the time it takes to produce consumables can increase the level of respect and care for a product. The time spent focusing on specific elements involved in the creation of food and drink allowed for ongoing relationships to be established between the human co-authors and the other organisms or actors in their environments that, at least for some, have not ended after the first harvest or the drinking of a beer. Through seeing changes in the behaviours of some of my co-authors and noting adjustments to my own habits, I have come to the conclusion that developing a sensitivity or sense of reverence for the wide range of actors or agencies reacting and interacting with the various components, some living, some not, that create the consumables humans are accustomed to in modern times, will be of great help to the continuation of food production in the future and therefore the ability to continue to sustain human life.

### Examples in Practice



### Take One Down, 2014<sup>7</sup>

A collaboration between artists Charli Clark and Steve Maher, SAFBREW T-58 and all male voice choir Könsikkäät.



LEFT: Fig. 15. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Pre-performance bottles: Bass, Baritone and Tenor*. 2014.

ABOVE: Fig. 16. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Rehearsal*. 2014.

*Take One Down* was a durational dialogical exchange concerned with beer brewing, singing, foraging and recycling. The work spanned 6 weeks and culminated in a performance within a gallery space and the Community? Amorph14! International Performance Festival context. The work involved brewing as a catalyst for discussion around DIY culture, the state monopoly on alcohol in Finland and creating an understanding of this established product with an awareness of the hidden actors within the situation. *Take One Down* was created and developed in collaboration with fellow artist Steve Maher, the yeast strain, SAFBREW T-58 and all male voice choir Könsikkäät and consisted of regular rehearsals, both to make beer and practice the choral performance. Through regular weekly meetings we went from initial introduction of concept right through to final performance outcome. Our strategy was clear and our timetable was dictated by the brewing process and the work/life

<sup>7</sup> <https://vimeo.com/135226729>, password: Beer. Here is a link to a 5 minute film, giving an insight into the creation and final performance of *Take One Down* discussed in this section. Please also find a hard copy in the back of this book.



commitments of the choir. During these meetings we made three different types of beer, dark, amber and pale and improved upon the recipe with each brew. The choir chose to name these beers Bass, Baritone and Tenor to reflect the different sections of their group, with the Bass being the deepest in colour and flavour, and Tenor being the lightest. We combined this with the choirs practice sessions building up to the performance, alongside demonstrations of the different stages of the brewing process until finally the last brew was made solely by them, with Steve and I present only as guidance for recipe amounts, process reminders and of course, tasters. At the end of the 6 weeks, Könsikkäät performed at MUU Gallery, Helsinki. During the performance the beer was gifted to the audience, finally pairing the choral harmony practiced alongside the brewing process, with the tasting of the beer we had carefully created together.

Through active and planned involvement in the brewing process we believe we have imparted the skills for the choir to make their own beer in the future if they so wish, likewise we on the other end have gained insight into as to how a choir organises itself around a performance and experienced first-hand the dynamics of such a community, so a mutual exchange existed between us in our many roles.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to remember here that this project was commissioned for Community? Amorph!14 International Performance Festival and was therefore always framed in this context and as an artwork. The gifting of the beer was accompanied by a professional choral harmony created by Könsikkäät in relation to their experience of learning to brew with Steve and I. The beer we produced was a high quality product and was gifted within a gallery space without instructions as to whether one should drink it as beer or keep it as an art object. Although the gallery and festival gave our performance the context of an art piece, the choir we worked with were professional performers themselves, increasing the polished nature of our outcome and enabling us to work together on the collaboration as artists. Thus the outcome did not have the feeling of a community project, but of an event planned and developed by

TOP RIGHT: Fig. 17. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Brewing*. 2014.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Fig. 18. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Kippis!*. 2014.

8 Charli Clark and Steve Maher, *The Relational Brewer Handbook*, 2015, awaiting publishing.







TOP LEFT: Fig. 19. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Brewing 2*. 2014.

TOP RIGHT: Fig. 20. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Rehearsal 2*. 2014.

BOTTOM LEFT: Fig. 21. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Designing labels*. 2014.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Fig. 22. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Bass on the boil*. 2014.



professionals. Working with people with prior knowledge of what it takes to create a performance, alongside our expertise in beer making, enabled us to concentrate on discussing some of the philosophical issues that were raised through the act of creating beer alongside the practicalities of the process.

One of the focuses of the work *Take One Down* was to investigate the cultural and historical significance of song and alcohol and the role it has played in the creation and sustaining of social situations and collectives. It aimed to highlight the human relationship with alcohol in both production and consumption and share the skill of making to empower the group to brew their own and acknowledge the processes that must occur for beer to be created. Through the act of exchanging knowledge in regards to how to brew beer, alongside the development of and rehearsal for a choral performance, an understanding of the human dependence on others for consumables was cultivated. A realisation of the simplicity of brewing was developed alongside discussions of appropriate ingredients and local foraging knowledge. Through looking to the local environment for ingredients in season, the available products dictated to some extent the choices and therefore the tastes and flavours of the beers. We foraged for seasonal edibles, using what was available at the time, seeing possibilities in the hedgerows, forests and pathways. Thus, the beer was created and inspired by the time of year and the opportunities given by the surroundings. The vibrant materiality of the fruits and berries available were boiled into the beer, and served to the public a couple of weeks later. The rosehips from Otaniemi, the rowanberries from Vaasankatu and the lingonberries from Nuuksio were collected and brewed into the different beers, imparting nutrients and bodily knowledge through the act of consumption. Here I applied the concept that a society can become apparent or strengthened by increasing the understanding of what can constitute a history. I recognise the act of consuming food from a particular place as a way to impart a different kind of knowledge production and historical record to the body of the consumer, making food “an actant in an agentic assemblage that [...] enters into what we become”<sup>9</sup>, linking the process involved in the creation of this artwork to Bennett’s thoughts concerning how actors influence ourselves and our physical bodies through the act of consumption. The beer becomes the information that enables the body to recognise a place through

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 51.

consuming, as it learns something new about the current state of edibles in Helsinki and perhaps possibilities that were present in the past.

The yeast came into focus as we began making the fermented product and entered into a relationship with the lively force SAFBREW T-58. Once the conditions were correct, i.e. temperature reached and sugar to water ratio checked, the yeast could be steeped and the fermenting could start. At this moment we relinquished control of the product to the yeast, helpless as the yeast started to convert the sugars into alcohol. Humans cannot produce beer in a day, or even a week, as at least a fortnight is needed to give the yeast enough time to process the sugars. Thus, we became the powerless bystander waiting patiently for the beer to come into being. This act of waiting, this relinquishing of control to another organism, is something that is not so common within our modern lives in relation to food and consumables, as many of us buy most of our edibles from others when and where we want them as opposed to growing and producing them for ourselves. By producing a product that competed with other beers currently on the market in Finland, tasting equally as good as anything brought from the stores, we began to develop a sense of trust and faith in the process that we had been through and the yeast with which we had worked. If we were to continue this process of learning to work with yeast, we could develop a sensitivity to this actor, seeing different qualities, traits and tastes expressed through the outcome of the beers through testing and trying out different combinations of ingredients and types of yeast. In doing this we could continue developing an understanding of the complexity and diverse relationships that form between the different elements in beer making, through observations of the fermenting process and the taste of the outcome. Making a range of beers allowed us to start this experimentation with Könsikkäät and raised the profile of yeast in the context of this relationship to a product they regularly drink and share together as friends. Through engaging them with the physical act of making, and thus interacting with the yeast, a sense of empowerment was fostered as the choir realised they had the ability to create good beer, giving them the confidence to continue brewing in the future.





TOP LEFT: Fig. 23. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Performance*. 2014.

BOTTOM LEFT: Fig. 24. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Post-performance*. 2014.

RIGHT: Fig. 25. Charli Clark, Steve Maher and Könsikkäät, *Audience*. 2014.



### Blue Fingers, 2014-15<sup>10</sup>

*A horticultural and handicraft skills exchange, in collaboration with textile artist and concerned resident Carol Clark and the growing and crafting communities of Bristol.*



LEFT: Fig. 26. *Metro Bus Development*, Feed Bristol, 2015. .

ABOVE: Fig. 27. *Worms and soil*, 2014

*Blue Fingers* is a dialogical, skill share network that aims to raise awareness of Bristol's soil quality. The project was started in collaboration with Carol Clark, a nutritionist, textile artist and concerned Bristol resident in December 2014. It began by bringing together two different communities within Bristol, the handicraft and horticultural, to exchange knowledge concerning the future of Bristol's prime agricultural land and the traditional skill of crochet. The work continued as development and construction at Feed Bristol began during 2015, and will be used as a platform for *Blue Lands*, a project to raise awareness across the UK, of areas of prime agricultural land in danger from development in the future. Through the bringing together of people with different knowledge backgrounds for an exchange of skills, the project increased the awareness of Bristol's Blue Finger, a piece of grade one agricultural land in North Bristol,

<sup>10</sup> <https://vimeo.com/132234091>, password: Soil. Here is a link to a 5 minute film, giving an insight into the creation and outcome of *Blue Fingers* discussed in this section. Please also find a hard copy in the back of this book.



currently being developed due to the council's desire to ease congestion into the city through a Metro bus scheme.

The aim of this project was to start a dialogue across crocheting groups and farmers of Bristol, by initiating conversation through sharing the skill of crocheting in exchange for learning about Feed Bristol and the current small scale agricultural situation there. Through bringing crafters to the Feed Bristol site we aimed to increase a sense of stewardship over the land and empower them to act through a craft they know, crochet. Many of the 200 crafters we met were unaware that this land even existed or of the significance of land classification within the Bristol area. In this case, crochet acted as the catalyst for dialogue and through the creation of woollen gloves with a singular blue finger, we brought together the two communities to create a dual purpose product; not only gloves for the winter, but supporting fashion statements dispersed around Bristol to encourage exchange of knowledge concerning food related issues and handicraft skills throughout the city. The work consisted of two initial meetings a month apart, the first taking place at Feed Bristol, a growing space and the site of contested development, and the second at Heartspace, a local crafting centre. During the meetings we invited an equal number of growers and crafters to be involved, pairing a grower with a crafter to enable direct exchange of skills and knowledge. The events involved an introduction to the land at Feed Bristol, a look at the difference in soil quality across the site and a sharing of information concerning the council's development plans for the area. After introducing the crochet pattern for the gloves, making began with the teaching conducted in a stitch and discuss format.

*Blue Fingers* was focused on rallying wider support and awareness of the high quality soil and local food initiatives that Bristol has at present. Through a realisation that both crafters and growers will have developed an ability or sensitivity to delicate materials i.e. seedlings or a needle and thread, we saw a connection we could build upon to develop an understanding between groups. It is not only a sensitivity in the hands that is developed by doing craft or plant based activities, but also an understanding of time. In both cases time and patience are needed to allow the plants to grow or the materials to form something through human guidance. By starting this project, using creativity as a statement of protest against council planning, we hoped to increase the number of Bristol citizens that knew or thought about local soil quality and food



TOP: Fig. 28. *Blue Fingers 1st Event Making Feed Bristol*. 2014.

BOTTOM: Fig. 29. *Blue Fingers 1st Event Making 2, Feed Bristol*. 2014.





TOP LEFT: Fig. 30. *Blue Fingers 1st Event, Walk about, Feed Bristol*. 2014.

TOP RIGHT: Fig. 31. *Blue Fingers, Making 3, Feed Bristol*. 2014.

BOTTOM LEFT: Fig. 32. *Blue Fingers 1st Event, Walk about 2, Feed Bristol*. 2014.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Fig. 33. *Blue Fingers 2nd Event, Coffee Morning, Heart Space*. 2015.



production. It was important to bring people to the land, to touch the soil and talk with the growers working there on a regular basis, to get non-gardening individuals thinking about the importance of soil. Soil has an intangible history embedded in it and by engaging with individuals to produce their own gloves to highlight a particular plot of land, we hoped to create reverence for the soil awaiting tarmac. By increasing citizen knowledge across Bristol about this land, we can enable them to speak out against the council being able to use land of this quality in the future for urban development. When producing food, soil is a key actor in the process, and within the soil, many actors engage with each other to enable plants to grow and the fertility of the soil to remain. Without these microbes, worms and other creatures, we would not be able to exist, so through creating events to highlight the significance of soil and differences in soil quality, we aimed to acknowledge soil as an element we need to work with and appreciate, rather than build on.

The land at Feed Bristol was traditionally and historically the market garden area that many of the first settlers would have understood and valued as key to their survival. It is important to reawaken that history and educate ourselves about this land through the consumption of food grown there, and take an active role in protecting it from being destroyed, by working purposefully with the land to create a suitable environment for other beings to exist and food to grow. Alongside initiating meetings, we created an internet presence, the Blue Fingers blog<sup>11</sup>, set up to provide updates of the project and the situation at Feed Bristol as part of public outreach. We also invited the Mayor George Ferguson, and all the council members involved in the decision making process and planning of this Metro bus scheme to engage with us and the project by creating a pair of gloves for each councillor that voted on the land, for or against, thanking or opposing them. In addition to sending the gloves we asked them questions in regards to their decision and received a few responses, one from pro-metro bus councillor and chairman of the meeting, Peter Abraham who stated the gloves “will act as a timely reminder of the obligations”<sup>12</sup> he

<sup>11</sup> “Blue Fingers”, Charli Clark and Carol Clark, created November 2014, [www.bluefingersforall.wordpress.com](http://www.bluefingersforall.wordpress.com).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Abraham, “A Response from Councillor Peter Abraham”, posted by Charli Clark, January 20, 2015, <https://bluefingersforall.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/a-response-from-councillor-peter-abraham/>

has towards “Bristol’s future and its citizens”<sup>13</sup>. This work was developed outside the context of a gallery, situating itself instead in places of importance for both groups, and on the hands of Bristol residents during winter 2014-15. The project was framed in the context of art by the artistic backgrounds of the initiators and the intensity of the working group was different to the previous project, *Take One Down*, due to difference in collective, a group of people from diverse backgrounds meeting for the first time unified by a common goal, as opposed to a pre-set group of friends with prior relations, with the aim being protest rather than performance event.



TOP: Fig. 34. Shaun, volunteer at Feed Bristol and grower, wearing his blue finger gloves. 2015.

BOTTOM LEFT: Fig. 35. Sending gloves to councillors. 2014.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Fig. 36. Bristol’s Mayor George Ferguson and the Blue Fingers gloves. 2015

<sup>13</sup> “A Response from Councillor Peter Abraham.”



# Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee) and Translating Histories, 2015<sup>14</sup>

*An investigation into the complexity and significance of honey to the survival of the honeybee.*



LEFT: Fig. 37. Microscope image of pollen from a beehive in Kaisaniemi Botanical Garden. 2015.

ABOVE: Fig. 38. Film still from *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen*, Hakaniemi market performance documentation. 2015.

*Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* and *Translating Histories*, was a project carried out in 2 parts. The first, *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)*, was a playful intervention both out in public space and inside the gallery format, taking place on a busy Saturday in Hakaniemi market square and during the group exhibition CURRENT STATE. The second, *Translating Histories*, is a continuous research project which involved an investigative performance that coincided and was performed alongside *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)*, when presented in the gallery format. The purpose of the project was to begin attempting to understand the bees' act of producing honey in relation to the human act of removing it in order to supply a consumable to the public. By sharing the knowledge I have acquired over the two years, through discussions with beekeepers, specialists and scientists, along with first-hand experience

<sup>14</sup> <https://vimeo.com/135226763>, password: Bee. Here is a link to a 5 minute film giving an insight into the creation and performances of *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* and *Translating Histories* discussed in this section. Please also find a hard copy in the back of this book.



and book research, with the general public, my aim was to place the bees and plants in the foreground as the main actors in the process of making honey. Through making pollen samples, investigating bee to plant relationships and tasting the sugar based alternatives to honey, I began to discover the complexity and importance of honey to the sharing of knowledge between bees and used this dual performative installation to bring my findings into public discussion.

*Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* was created in the form of a market stall with a difference. The performative installation was a 'honey' tasting and dialogical exchange that invited the viewer to experience the yearly cycle of a beehive through the sense of taste. It involved a pop up stall offering tasters of different honeys and sugar syrup mixtures (with added multivitamins or brewing yeast for example) to the viewer and posed the question of quality as a starting point for a wider discussion concerning the complexity of honey. The work aimed to create discussion concerning the use of sugar syrup in the commercial honey industry, focusing on qualities usually assessed when rating honey: taste, colour, viscosity and aroma. I used chalkboards to help get the ideas flowing and to record the knowledge produced through the act of tasting. A variety of descriptions were given for the different samples, and by inviting the public to record their own thoughts for others to agree or disagree with later, I started to build a more rounded view and opinion of the tasters I was offering. The interactions I had with the audience were diverse, from basic discussions on taste, to very in-depth philosophical questioning of the contrast of qualities, the experience of the bee, and a thorough examination of the sugar syrup mixes (currently being developed by scientists and concerned beekeepers to mimic honey to improve the state of bee health). Through questioning the enjoyment and taste of sugar syrup versus honey, my aim was to raise an awareness of these actors alongside questioning the use of sugar in the honey industry in relation to the effect it could have on the immune systems of the individuals that consume it, and the knock on effect it could be having to the population of these important insects. Whilst researching the correlation between the decline in bee health in recent decades and standard sugar syrup practices in commercial beekeeping for *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)*, a fear of damage to profits and to industry became particularly apparent. It was thought-provoking to experience, through a discussion with a friend and beekeeper, a level of expressed concern in relation to the artwork for fear that it could show beekeeping in Finland in a bad light, even though the practice

of feeding syrup sugar to bees is common in many parts of the world. The beekeeper was well aware of the issues being raised, but had a vested interest in the industry and therefore didn't feel it should be discussed in public in case it might damage his livelihood. This conversation only highlighted the importance of my project and of artists in general in contemporary society as free agents, independent from businesses or money orientated incentives, and therefore still able to question whether, beyond profit margins, what we are doing is correct. Being a free agent, I continued regardless, using the tasting as a starting point to engage people in critical conversation, and to reveal some of the complexities surrounding the human consumption of honey and its importance within our eco-system.



Fig. 39. Film still from *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen*, at Hakaniemi Market. 2015.

On the following pages:

TOP LEFT: Fig. 40. Film still from *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen*, at Hakaniemi Market. 2015.

TOP RIGHT: Fig. 41. *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen* at CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.

BOTTOM LEFT: Fig. 42. Film still from *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen*. Hakaniemi Market. 2015

BOTTOM RIGHT 1: Fig. 43. Film still from *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen* at CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.

BOTTOM RIGHT 2: Fig. 44. Film still from *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen* at CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.









TOP: Fig. 45. Film still from *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen*, at CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.

BOTTOM: Fig. 46. Film still from *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen*, at CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.

This work was performed in two contexts, both outside and inside the gallery. Firstly, performing outside in a busy food market enabled me to reach people in an environment directly related to food and away from the expectation of an artwork. For this performance in Hakaniemi Market Square, I invited Finnish performer Hannah Maria Gullichsen to accompany me to help with the difference in language. Prior to the event we met on a number of occasions to discuss ideas and thoughts around the tastes of the samples, as well as about bees themselves. It was important to have a native speaker with me out in the public space to ensure that anyone who wanted to engage with me was not discouraged by having to speak English. Secondly, I performed it as part of the CURRENT STATE exhibition in a gallery space, alongside part 2, *Translating Histories*. Over the course of both performances I was able to invite over 200 people to taste honey with me, around 45 at Hakaniemi market and almost 200 over the week of CURRENT STATE. Responses to the different flavours contrasted greatly and raised a number of new questions I had not considered when thinking about bees. It was important for me to engage with people in a food based context as well as an art one. This engagement outside the gallery context with strangers who were not necessarily interested in viewing art, but in the food market of Hakaniemi, meant that I had a chance to discuss the quality of taste, without the artistic merit of the work being questioned.

*Translating Histories* is an ongoing research project that started in 2014, concerning the death of a honeybee colony in Kaisaniemi Botanical Garden in the winter of 2013-14. During the course of a week within the exhibition CURRENT STATE, the discoveries made from microscopy sessions and discussions with pollen expert, Tarja Ollikka, were sorted and laid out to enable a human understanding of the biodiversity and range of pollens present in a teaspoon of honey. What remained of the deceased colony's honey stores was small but enough to analyse, and once the sample was created, a honey analysis began. With over 6000 pollen grains in just a 5g sample it became clear that honey was more than an excellent source of protein and amino acids. It is also a record, a map, a library if you will, containing information to be passed on, from summer bees to winter bees, for them to 'digest' and 'understand' the landscape in which they are situated during the long winter inside. It is important to note that the sample I was working with had around 40 different types of pollen within the 6000 grains, however this honey was taken from a small section of a single bar within the hive, and therefore is perhaps only



representative of one to two weeks' worth of collecting, if that, and by noting this and explaining my process of analysis to those that met with me in the first week of the exhibition, it allowed the viewer an insight into the time it takes for a bee to gather a sufficient amount of pollen for a single teaspoon.



TOP: Fig. 47. *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen* and *Translating Histories*, installation shot 1 at CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.

BOTTOM: Fig. 48. *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen* and *Translating Histories*, installation shot 2 at CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.

TOP RIGHT: Fig. 49. *Translating Histories*, installation shot 3, CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Fig. 50. *Translating Histories*, installation shot 4, CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.







The projects ran alongside each other, both attempting to engage the individual who entered the space in a conversation with me or other interested parties with the real actors involved in the creation of honey, the bees and the plants. Through presenting a sensorial experience of 'honey' alongside an in-depth analysis of a sample from the local area, my intention was to engage people in a discussion about honey as both a food source, that cannot be simply replaced by a sugar substitute, and as a historical archive, functioning like a library to inform new bees born after the bloom of summer about the situation they will face in the coming spring. Over the course of the first week I slowly revealed my analysis of the history and had open discussions with a number of viewers engaging them with my process and the books I had brought along to help me. In the second week I stopped performing and left, allowing the space and the investigative 'map' I had been producing to become a passive place for people to experience without my presence. I felt this was important to allow time for the work to be interpreted without my intervention and explanation. The collective group I identify as to have been working with here was much broader than in the other two projects as it includes the bees, plants, beekeepers, experts and finally the individuals that were open to engaging with me during my time in Hakaniemi market square and in the gallery, as well as those who took the time to explore the space for themselves when I was gone.



TOP LEFT: Fig. 51. *Translating Histories*, installation shot 5, CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.

BOTTOM LEFT: Fig. 52. *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen on the move*, CURRENT STATE, Cable Factory. 2015.



## Reflections: Putting Theory into Practice

The three projects I have presented and discussed in this text are examples of artworks that have been produced following a method I developed as a way to acknowledge the human-nonhuman collective in the production of consumables. Although each project stems from the same desire to engage with individuals in this context, there are distinct differences between the visibility of the ‘vibrant bodies’<sup>15</sup> and the direct interaction that each situation allows. Each project was intent in fostering a human relationship with hidden actors, however, it was only in *Take One Down*, that the group had a direct interaction with the vibrancy of the actor, made aware of the impact and importance of the yeast through the physical act of adding it to the brew and working within the constraints it imposed. Therefore, it could be said that the visible level of vibrancy was directly experienced as the liquids changed over time, foaming and fizzing because of the process. The other two projects offered more indirect interactions with the actor(s), but still engaged the groups with their presence in different ways. In *Blue Fingers*, the crafters were introduced to the vibrancy and importance of the soil through the enthusiasm of the growers and were given a glimpse into what it takes to grow vegetables through visiting the Feed Bristol site, and although they didn’t grow anything themselves they did eat lunch on site, which included sampling some of the leafy greens from the grounds. Lastly, in *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* and *Translating Histories*, the collective of people that joined in the tasting and discussed the investigative blackboard were indirectly experiencing, through the sense of taste and the visual language of the pollen grains, the vibrancy left behind by the actors that are no longer around, due to the short lifespan of a bee in the summer and the death of the *Translating Histories* colony. They did not experience the bees directly, in the traditional sense through the act of beekeeping, but were invited to become aware of the vibrancy of honey through learning about the pollen grains collected and stored within, and given the option to contrast that vibrancy with the alternative food for bees, sugar. When creating these projects it was useful for me to remember Bennett’s levels of vibrancy when understanding how different interactions between differing entities could be possible and productive.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Bennett’s term, taken from her argument against environmentalism and towards vital materialism.

Although artists usually act and create work in relation to their aesthetic judgement, it is also important to note the ecological impact of their practice. In terms of actualising my artworks within the framework of a social-specific practice that aims to use creativity to influence human behaviour in relation to environmental issues, the collecting of materials and production of each of these projects needed to be conducted with an awareness of potential impacts<sup>16</sup>. This could, for some be seen as a limitation, however I see it more as an opportunity. In *Take One Down*, the materials were sourced locally, foraged and recycled directly as in the case of the beer bottles, and for *Blue Fingers*, organic wool with natural dyes was sourced alongside the odd ball found second hand. To make *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* and *Translating Histories*, construction materials for the piece were found in trash bins and local recycling centres, and the stall itself was designed to flatten down to enable it to be transported on foot or by local transport as opposed to hiring a van. When creating work to alter certain behaviours it is important not to replicate those behaviours wherever possible, thus it is essential to be aware of the environmental impact of the social-specific project that is being created. This awareness is not only a rehearsal of my principles and personal reasoning, but also sends a message of possibility to those viewing the work that old materials can be reappropriated and adapted for new purposes. The reworking of old materials is, for me, an enriching aesthetic experience, as working within given constraints of found materials, to create something new, adds an element of spontaneity to the planning process, allowing for new possibilities to develop during the making process, as well as avoiding unnecessary consumerism.

As with many projects involving public collaboration, it is not possible to determine whether there will be any long term changes in the thoughts and actions of the collaborators and collectives involved, or to state that any changes

<sup>16</sup> For more discussion on measuring the environmental impacts of artworks and the responsibility of an artist to assess the impacts of making a work, not just in relation to the artwork, that speaks or attempts to engage with environmental issues, but in relation to all artworks made in modern times, see Ossi Naukkarinen, “Part 2: Environments, chapters 2: The Environmental Effects of Art, and 3: The Responsibility of Art” in *Art of the Environment* (Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki, 2007), 103-128, where he raises and attempts to answer a number of relevant questions related to this theme. ‘Responsibility’ is seen as an “understanding the consequences of your actions in terms of good and evil or wrong”, 126.

that have or will be made in the future are a direct result of the artwork. This is partly due to the complexity of human nature and the various influences that impact individuals on a daily basis. It could also be due to the fact that it attempts to tackle some deeply engrained philosophies and problematic ideas pertaining to the notion of society, humanity and the separation of nature, “that did not emerge instantly, rather gradually. It would not be feasible to try and solve them overnight”<sup>17</sup>. The outcomes of each project also involved a greater number of people than those who engaged as part of the collective and initial making of the work, so the understanding these individuals took with them will be diverse and impossible to gauge. *Take One Down* not only taught a group of 14 choir members the skills to make beer, but also shared that beer, along with songs and hints of the process, with a larger audience at the choral performance where the beer was gifted to the public. *Blue Fingers* initially involved meetings with large numbers of people in various knitting and stitching circles across Bristol, producing 12 glove makers and another 12 pairs of gloves for councillors. Since then the gloves have made an appearance on BBC News Points West, and on the hands of people spread across the city. *Syö niin kuin mehiläinen (Eat Like a Bee)* and *Translating Histories* has also engaged with a vast number of people from different backgrounds, ages and nationalities during the time of the performance and many more during the week that the installation was left unattended. The extent to which an awareness of nonhuman actors was fostered during the production and execution of these artworks is also impossible to measure as it remained essential not to tell others what to do or how to think about their relationship to these actants, and preferable to create events or environments in which people could consider their own relationship to the nonhuman elements that they were invited to experience.

I prefer, therefore, to determine the success of my projects not through the number of attendees or possible changes that could be implemented, but instead through my interactions with individuals. In the words of Beuys, “[w]e have a duty to sow the seed. Certainly not all the seeds will sprout; but for us it is enough if one does. This will produce further fruit which will produce further seeds”<sup>18</sup>. Although I can be certain that these projects alone will not change the

world, it is important to start somewhere, and to plant these seeds of thought in the hope that some do grow. I have so far planted these seeds through engaging with others, releasing my ideas and research concerning society into the public realm through art projects. I base the evaluation of my projects, not just on the reactions of others; the experiences of the people that I engage with, but also on my own responses that have changed and developed through the group discussions and creation of the artworks. When I have had dialogues with collaborators that openly question themselves or myself, then it helps to solidify or alter my personal stance or understanding of the elements in the discussion. Through this questioning I continue to develop my personal awareness of how to engage with others. With the understanding that we are living in an interwoven and entangled mesh, I realise that by developing myself, I can contribute to a ripple effect that shifts or extends the understanding of the complexity and diverse nature of those nonhumans we rely on in our food system. My goals include avoiding individualism and offering an alternative consumerism to capitalism as I invite people to discuss together, learn from one another and experience food products with me without a need to purchase. I am not selling a new brand of beer, or sampling honey to increase a company’s sales figures, I am purely interested in the experience of that product for the people who join in tasting it with me. Through creating different methods and situations to invite others to share food and drink, the projects have confirmed my prior opinion that food brings people together. When I see strangers or friends brought together over this shared experience of edibles I am confident that my project has been a success, for at least for that moment some sort of conversational drift is in motion.

<sup>17</sup> Ossi Naukkarinen, *Art of the Environment*, 120.

<sup>18</sup> De Domizio Durini, *Beuys Voice*, 218.





Fig. 53. Beetroot in my allotment, Otaniemi, Finland, 2015.

## Conclusion

This thesis has been an enquiry into the potentials of my arts practice, which has been developed through research into both non-art theories and art historical precedents. This research has enabled me to develop art works that recognise and draw from an expanded notion of social as associations<sup>1</sup>, that includes human and nonhuman actants within a society; a sense of belonging created by the geographical, emotional or historical context that enable these associations to exist. I decided to position my work within a particular category of critical art, identified as social-specific practice, to enable me to bring the theories of sociologist Bruno Latour and political theorist Jane Bennett<sup>2</sup> into an artistic context, combining ideas across disciplines; pairing or contrasting sociological and political philosophies with those of art historians, art critics and theorists<sup>3</sup>. I chose to draw from the practices of artists, such as Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Joseph Beuys and the Critical Art Ensemble<sup>4</sup>, whose artworks and existence have influenced and laid foundations for my work to grow and social-specificity to emerge. By expanding the definition of social as associations within the framework of society, and alongside Bennett's<sup>5</sup> argument concerning the need to recognise the vibrancy of others acting on Earth as part of a human-nonhuman collective, my artistic method has evolved through a series of projects created to engage people with these nonhuman actors and their vibrancy. Through researching both non-art and

1 Refer to chapter 1, and in particular p.10, for my discussion concerning Latour and his term 'social as association'.

2 Refer to chapter 1 p.9-15 for an explanation of Latour's and Bennett's understanding of the notion of society and the social.

3 These include, among others, Miwon Kwon p.20, Jean-Luc Nancy p.22 and Arnold Berleant p.22.

4 See chapter 3, p.33-43 for a detailed discussion on the importance of the work of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Joseph Beuys and the Critical Art Ensemble to the development of social-specific practice and p.42-43 for a summary of their key contributions.

5 See p.11-12 for examples of Jane Bennett's argument that 'decent' humans and politics can be formed if we 'tune in to' the natural tendencies, i.e. the other actors that influence a situation.

artistic practices I have been able to identify and borrow useful elements, moulding them to help further develop my artworks. Latour's ANT is a prime example of this, useful for my initial expansion in understanding of what social could be, but limiting in his denouncing of the structure of society<sup>6</sup>. Thus, it was necessary to explore other theorists that were already acknowledging elements of Latour's 'social as associations' to broaden the possibilities of his theory, returning to Bennett<sup>7</sup> to continue my development and acceptance of society as, at least for the time being, a useful structure.

I chose to identify social-specific practice as a category within the realm of critical art to help understand my position and give myself a space to develop artwork. It has allowed me to recognise which aids I find useful for creation and completion of the work and confirm for myself what I am setting out to achieve. These aids are both artists and theorists that I see connections between, which have not necessarily acknowledged one another publicly, but clearly share philosophies. The use of social-specificity has been preferable to attempting to fit the work I produce within a pre-constructed category, art historical context or construct, which could have set unnecessary limits to my projects and practice. Through my writing I have been able to structure my thoughts with regards to different and complex non-art theories that have inspired me to develop the work presented in chapter 4. Learning as I go, I have built upon the elements that run through each project, using the categorisation of social-specificity not as an absolute, but as a proposition and tool for thinking. It should not be seen as a controlling or limiting influence in itself, as it is open to change and development as my practice continues to grow. My thesis has been an investigation into the possibilities that can be created by introducing theories from other disciplines into the context of art and can now act as a platform from which I can continue to build my practice. I have chosen to work mainly with sociological theories and have trusted the authority of those such as Latour and Bennett over others in their fields. This

<sup>6</sup> Refer to p.9-11 to understand the difference in viewpoint between Latour's understanding of nature versus society and mine.

<sup>7</sup> Although Bennett does not actively use the notion of society, she does not banish it either like Latour does. Her argument is more concerned with 'exploring action and responsibility across the human-nonhuman divide', looking towards acknowledging the human as many selves as opposed to one singular self rather than blaming the construct of society for the human disconnection with their 'array of bodies', start from p.11 for Bennett's viewpoint.

is because their viewpoints struck a chord with me and I see genuine potential in their ideas for creating healthier environments and ecologies through changing the human understanding of our position in the social situation of Earth. By adapting the terminology of social and society I have been able to reach an understanding of the interwoven and collective situation of life on Earth. This understanding has helped me develop a way to feel useful and take action with the intent to broaden what constitutes a society and identify those not normally recognised by the framework.

The three projects I created were specifically geared towards edibles and developed from my own personal interest and concern for contemporary food issues, alongside prior relationships I had formed with yeast, soil and bees. Modern food production and industrialised agriculture has created problems that affect how the majority of people survive today, on both a mental and physical level, with many of the links to traditional food preparation and production being altered, lost or broken. My practice is concerned with mending some of these broken ties and connections between people and food based actors, merging the human and the nonhuman within our food system to redevelop an understanding of the importance of these nonhuman elements that enable our existence. It is easier to acknowledge and accept that humans are always living in collaboration with others, both human and nonhuman, when one becomes aware of the necessity of the other during the creation of food, as opposed to the creation of something less concrete, less physically visible or less vital to survival. Through working to foster this awareness, my aim has been to increase consideration for the actors I have exposed through the work, always present, but not always apparent. I can now continue to develop this working style, helping to guide myself and hopefully other humans towards living a less destructive existence that acknowledges the layers of cross-collaboration necessary for our survival.

In relation to guiding humanity towards living a less destructive life, the potential impacts of improving the awareness of the nonhuman in our food systems could be significant. If I take a moment to dream of the possible outcomes from this alteration in thinking, it gives me hope for the future and a purpose or reason to exist. For example, these changes could include a reduction in the use of hormonal treatments, antibiotics and other 'medicines' given to livestock, that then inadvertently end up in our bodies through the act of eating,



merging the nutrients and other additives with ourselves. It could also change the way we use pesticides through a realisation that by using them we are destroying a vast number of important others alongside ourselves, damaging the fertilisation of our soils and weakening the surrounding eco-system. A pest could then be seen, no longer as something to get rid of by any means, but as another actor within the system that should be acknowledged and to some extent understood. It is common practice in permaculture<sup>8</sup> for example, to dig a pond in the centre of a vegetable patch that is rife with slugs so that they can be eaten by frogs and strengthen the system, instead of destroying them with poison that will in time poison the birds and other predators that come across them. The term organic farming could then become obsolete, as it would no longer be seen as special to avoid using harmful practices or chemical substances. A change in the perceived value of edibles and the environments those edibles are produced in, through a renewed understanding of the complexity of creation and the other actors enabling that creation, may help redirect investment towards basics such as food and drink, enabling farming to become a financially viable career path. This could improve our overall health and shift working people towards physically useful jobs and back into the fields of farms. I do not mean to say that most jobs<sup>9</sup> are not useful or unfulfilling, or that most employees want or should be working the land. However, perhaps if they had the option to experience what it is like to form relationships with

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<sup>8</sup> Permaculture stands for permanent agriculture and was coined by two Australians in the 1970s, however it had been practised by many indigenous groups for thousands of years before being named. Permaculture is the practice of looking to natural eco-systems and using them as models from which to design and create the human environment. For an in-depth explanation of permaculture and how to apply it for temperate climates, Patrick Whitefield's book "The Earth Care Manual", 2004 is a fascinating read.

<sup>9</sup> Many jobs are of course necessary for the world to continue as we know it or expect it. We need doctors, politicians, social workers, shopkeepers, firemen, teachers, sanitation workers, scientists, artists, engineers, designers and many other individuals working to keep day-to-day systems functioning. However, there are many jobs that, depending on who you are speaking with, could be considered less than useful, or at least less useful than feeding the nation. To use the UK as an example, since the destruction of the manufacturing industry, jobs have been becoming increasingly more desk orientated as physical productivity has been replaced with computer based productivity. I am not calling for the end of technology, however I am aiming for a rise in job opportunities where people are responsible for the physical creation of goods again. I am not talking about the creation of plastic toys or gadgets that people think they need that aid capitalist consumerism, but rather the creation of genuinely useful goods that are of real value to your own existence and to those around you, with food and drink being a prime example.

nonhuman actors that are essential for existence, they may see new value in the work and the land that sustains them. This development could not only change how we view the importance of other beings that inhabit the Earth, but our own self-importance as a species. Through acknowledging the vibrancy of the materials in our immediate surroundings, we could perhaps see that the Earth is shared with others that deserve our respect. Although the possibilities for a change in mentality that I suggest here are hugely speculative, they could be seen as potential outcomes of nurturing this way of thinking. However, the point I am trying to make is that if our food system was based on the understanding that Earth is an interconnected collective and we are part of that assemblage, then we would perhaps spend more of our time trying to learn from our environment, observing first and seeing how we fit in naturally, as opposed to flattening land and starting developments from scratch. We could then work to develop farming practices that do not alienate or separate us from the creatures we are consuming, but rather connect and realign our bodies with their localities.

Although my practice is currently concerned with tackling issues concerning our food system, this way of working could also be used to reveal other important human-nonhuman relationships, e.g. phytoplankton and the ability to breathe, or bacteria that develop the immune system enabling us to interact with the world without fear of infection. Although there is no concrete evidence as to the possible impact of my social-specific practice on social or political change, using an arts practice and the aesthetic and physical desire to make, to explore, and to question how the world functions, can provide an important service to humanity. As the world continues to develop within a system built by monetary incentives and capitalist culture, where people are consumers, consumers provide profits, profits are progress and progress is a necessity, it can be a refreshing change to engage with an individual who is not trying to sell anything, but instead is wanting to ask, to talk and to exchange knowledge at a human to human to nonhuman level. As the number of private businesses funding scientific and technological research increases, it will become even more necessary to remain independent. As an artist I can remain a free agent, able to question, confront, pull part and reimagine the policies and practices of these industries, speaking out, so that humanity does not end up with another type of industrial or agricultural revolution that is even more damaging and destructive than the one that currently exists.

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